

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

"Mind How You Vote, Boys": The Crisis of Economic Voter Intimidation in the Late-Nineteenth
Century United States, 1873-1896

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of History

By

Gideon Cohn-Postar

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

September 2020

Abstract

This dissertation argues that the convergence of industrialized wage-labor, increased economic precariousness, close and partisan elections, and weak ballot laws dramatically increased the incidence of economic voter intimidation between 1873 and 1896. When this form of coercion primarily affected African American voters, as it did in the 1860s, politicians did not perceive it as a threat to democracy. White Americans' fear that wage labor rendered them as economically precarious, and thus politically dependent, as they believed African Americans were, provoked a prolonged crisis. Concern over the threat that economic voter intimidation posed to white men's citizenship shaped the ongoing debates over the nature of manhood suffrage, the role of the federal government in protecting African American men's political rights, and the future of industrial capitalism. Politicians, ordinary workingmen, and labor, reform, and socialist advocates saw employer coercion as a threat to both American democracy and industrial capitalism because it seemed to undermine the independence—and therefore manliness and whiteness—of industrial workers. Between 1888-1892, these reformers transformed the way that Americans voted in nearly every state by enacting ballot secrecy laws to break the chain of information between employers, their employees, and their employees' ballots. The combination of ballot secrecy and a cultural backlash against economic voter intimidation spurred by employers' excesses during the fraught 1896 presidential election drove the practice out of the mainstream in American political culture by the turn of the century.

Acknowledgments

I have been extraordinarily blessed for the past eleven years. During that time I spent four years in college, two years working in academic administration, and five years in graduate school. I had the opportunity to do work that I loved, learn new things every day, engage with brilliant colleagues, advisors, and students, and—most incredible of all—create just a little bit of "new knowledge." You hold that new knowledge in your (presumably virtual) hands now. This dissertation would not exist without the support and encouragement of the people below and many others besides.

Thank you to the faculty who inspired and encouraged me to pursue history at UC Davis: Edward Dickinson, Omnia El Shakry, Ari Kelman, Kathryn Olmsted, Sally McKee, Eric Rauchway, Kevin Roddy, Sudipta Sen, Daniel Stolzenberg, and Clarence Walker,.

It was a joy to work, learn, and teach at Northwestern University. I will miss seeing Annerys Cano, Tricia Liu, Jasmine Bomer, Susan Delrahim, and Eric West when I would wander through Harris Hall with a question to ask or just with the need to chat. Thank you to the faculty who supported, challenged, and shaped me into a historian at Northwestern—Ken Alder, Deborah Cohen, Caitlin Fitz, Joanna Grisinger, Sean Hanretta, Daniel Immerwahr, Michael Sherry, and Ji-Yeon Yuh. Susan Pearson and Kevin Boyle guided me through this process as members of my committee, answering all my questions, no matter how basic and silly. Thank you for your support and for reading my whole dissertation!

Above all thank you to my advisor, Kate Masur, for trusting, pushing, and encouraging me for five terrifying and exhilarating years. Without your endless patience reading and commenting on drafts and excising endless adjectives this dissertation would have never happened... or it would have stretched for an entirely unreadable and adjective-filled 800 pages.

My fellow graduate students have taught me more than any edited volume ever could. I'm proud to know you and call you friends and colleagues. Special thanks and love to Carl Creason, Lev Daschko, Gabrielle Guillerm, Bennett Jones, Katya Maslakowski, Amanda Kleintop, Emily Lyon, Caity Monroe, Robin Pokorski, Mary Kate Robbett, Ana Rosado, Vanda Rajcan, Charlotte Rosen, Andrea Rosengarten, Leigh Soares, Rachel Wallner, and my past and forever roommate, Jayson Porter. Special special thanks to Matt Herrera for talking through every aspect of this project with me and keeping me grounded and sane.

My family have always supported and encouraged me in my historical pursuits, Even though this work has kept me on the other side of the country from you, thank you mom, dad, Daniel, and Karalyn for always visiting, writing, calling, and all in all just being in my corner when I needed you. I love you all dearly. Special thanks to Uncle Mike and Aunt Adeen for your support and for scooping me up from the Metro after all my trips to the National Archives! Thank you to my

girlfriend Emma for listening to me read lengthy portions of my dissertation aloud, for baking fantastic cakes to make completing this project seem fun and meaningful amidst the ongoing global upheavals, and for loving me back.

I am grateful for the funding to conduct my research provided by the Tobin Project, The Dirksen Center, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and Northwestern University. Special thanks to Stephanie Brehm for her support, friendship, and guidance through all the logistics of graduate school.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
Chapter One: "The Reasonable Fear:" The Causes and Context of the Crisis.....	28
Chapter Two: "Vote For Your Bread and Butter:" The Methods of Coercion.....	63
Chapter Three: "A Pay-roll or a Shotgun?" Coercion and the Rhetoric of Reconstruction.....	103
Chapter Four: "My Vote is as Good as Jay Gould's:" Manhood, Independence, and the Labor Question at the Polls.....	134
Chapter Five: "For the Sake of His Vote:" Labor Proposes the Secret Ballot Solution.....	165
Chapter Six: "The Only Relief:" The Fight for Ballot Secrecy in Connecticut and New York...	190
Chapter Seven: "Employees Everywhere Are Being Intimidated:" The Presidential Election Campaign of 1896.....	257
Conclusion: The End of the Coercion Crisis.....	331
Bibliography.....	343

Introduction

"In your dread of dictators you established a state of society in which every ward boss is a dictator, every financier a dictator, every private employer a dictator, all with the livelihood of the workers at their mercy, and no public responsibility."

-George Bernard Shaw, "The Political Madhouse in America and Nearer Home," 1933

The overseer of the city road-building crew in Portland, Maine, excelled at threatening his employees. Known to history only by his last name—Staples—the overseer routinely harangued his workers when they loafed on the job or stopped to chat with passersby, but he reserved his harshest threats for election day. As the road-builders left the job site to cast their ballots in 1880, Staples followed along, shouting "Mind how you vote, boys; vote for your bread and butter. If you cut my throat now I'll cut yours hereafter. I am on your track and will camp on it." His colorful talk of bread and butter, cutting throats, and camping on tracks were threats, public threats to fire any laborer who voted against his chosen candidates. When the road-building crew arrived at the polling place, Staples stood inside the room and watched as each of his men selected a ballot, folded it in half, and deposited it in the ballot box. A bricklayer on the crew whispered to some of the poll workers standing nearby that "this is not the ballot I would vote could I help it." But what could he and his coworkers do? None risked their bread and butter. They all voted how their boss demanded.¹

Twenty-six years later, a probation officer in Kansas City, Missouri, named Frank McCrary received a phone call from a politically and economically powerful man in the city.

¹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Testimony in the Contested Election Case of Samuel J. Anderson vs. Thomas B. Reed*, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., 1881, Mis. Doc. No. 13, 151.

Over a staticky connection, the man threatened that if McCrary "wanted to hold [his] job" he had better pledge his vote to the district Republican captain. McCrary's response was immediate and public. He sent a letter to his supervisor explaining the threat he had received and demanding that his boss guarantee that city employees could vote free of any threats to their jobs. If he was not allowed to vote however he pleased in the upcoming election, McCrary threatened, he would resign.² When the story of the encounter made it to the press, McCrary's boss remarked that he was "sorry anything has been said" and made clear that he supported McCrary's right to work free of threats to his livelihood. As the local paper put it the next day, the "threat that he would make him lose his job had no terrors for Mr. McCrary."³ By opposing the effort to intimidate him, McCrary was making a profound statement: a man's vote and his jobs should not be connected. As the experience of the road workers in Maine a quarter-century earlier demonstrated, however, that had not always been the case in the United States of America.

These two confrontations were separated by a thousand miles and two and a half decades but they contained the same essential elements — a threat from a powerful man to a worker that he would either vote as he was told or lose his job. Why did the road workers feel they had no choice but to obey, while the threat "had no terrors" for McCrary? What had changed in those twenty-six years to transform economic voter intimidation from a serious issue worthy of congressional investigation into an encounter that a worker could not only dismiss, but feel

² Letter from Frank E. McCrary to Henry L. McCune, October 13, 1906, George Washington McCrary Collection, Jackson County, Missouri, Historical Society Archives, 2251.

³ "Wouldn't Obey the Boss," *Kansas City Star*; Newspaper clippings, George Washington McCrary Collection, Jackson County, Missouri, Historical Society Archives.

comfortable replying to with a public threat to resign his position, confident that he would not lose his job?

American men who worked for wages in the late-nineteenth century were economically precarious at all times. During those years of rapid industrialization and constant financial panics, the loss of a job could mean poverty and starvation for a worker and his family. Employers throughout the nation took advantage of workingmen's fear of losing their jobs to try to control their political expression. Bosses were able to connect workers' jobs to their votes because when voters went to the polls in this era they did so without the protection of secrecy, or really any legal protections at all. Bosses like Staples could walk into the polls with their men, watch them take a party ballot, and keep close track of who supported their chosen candidates. Employers took advantage of the weaknesses of election law to intimidate their economically precarious employees at the polls on a mass scale during the Gilded Age.

When McCrary made his stand in 1906, those circumstances had changed. Outside of a handful of states in the South, the Staples' of the world could no longer follow their employees into the polls to see how they voted. The omnipresence of economic coercion, along with other forms of electoral shenanigans, had prompted the passage of secret ballot laws in a rush of reform between 1888 and 1892. The secret ballot, combined with a decline in electoral competitiveness and relative economic stabilization in the new century, reduced the power and effectiveness of economic threats. Additionally, decades of heavily publicized instances of economic voter intimidation during nearly every election in the period produced a cultural backlash. Such threats had often been effective, but employers became increasingly wary of the

bad press that accompanied them, particularly in the aftermath of the contentious 1896 presidential election. When Frank McCrary insouciantly tossed aside the threat to his job, he was taking advantage of legal, cultural, and economic changes in workplaces and polling places. Those changes were the result of decades of advocacy and activism by labor leaders, politicians, journalists, and ordinary workers who believed that their job and their vote should not be connected.

This dissertation explores the crisis of economic coercion that shaped elections, workplaces, and laws throughout the United States between 1873 and 1896. It makes two linked arguments. First, economic voter intimidation was a real problem in this era. Employers took advantage of the economic precariousness of their employees. They watched what ballots their employees brought to the polls and fired them if they dared to cast a ballot not endorsed by the company. Bosses used economic pressures to influence the votes of their employees on an unprecedented scale during those two decades. Sometimes these threats were not carried out. Often, however, workingmen who refused to vote as their employers demanded were fired or ejected from company housing, plunging voters and their families into unemployment or homelessness or both just as winter arrived. Evidence of the methods and extent of this coercion emerges from congressional contested election testimony, special congressional investigations, corporate archives, the personal papers of politicians, and newspapers.

Second, the political intimidation of workingmen by their employees prompted a rhetorical and cultural crisis. Fears of coercion interacted with one of the core concerns in American political culture in the late-nineteenth century, what contemporaries and historians

describe as the "Labor Problem" or the "Labor Question." This question was whether American democracy could survive the new industrial order of permanent wage work.⁴ The rapid growth of industrial capitalism after the Civil War, particularly the explosion of unskilled wage labor that accompanied and drove it, seemed to many Americans to threaten the existence of universal manhood suffrage and representative democracy. Labor leaders, politicians, and ordinary workingmen interpreted the economic intimidation of wage-workingmen as a particularly dangerous element of the labor problem. Coercion undermined both the economic independence and perceived manhood of workingmen, threatening their assertion of political equality. Workingmen, labor leaders, and reform advocates worried that—through economic voter intimidation—wage labor capitalism could destroy democracy. Some worried in turn that widespread coercion would convince workingmen that they could not rely on peaceful democratic reform and so would destroy capitalism by embracing socialism or anarchism. For Americans concerned about the stability of either democracy or capitalism, economic voter intimidation emerged in the late-1870s and 1880s as the most likely avenue for that simmering conflict to explode.

⁴ Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age*, Working Class in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 2-3. See also Rosanne Currarino, "The Politics of "More": The Labor Question and the Idea of Economic Liberty in Industrial America," *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 17-36, 17, Edward T. O'Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, New York; London, [England]: Cornell University Press, 1999), David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Leon Fink, *The Long Gilded Age: American Capitalism and the Lessons of a New World Order* (Philadelphia, US: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), John B. Jentz and Richard Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital: Class, Politics, and Democracy during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

The place of the coercion of African American voters in southern states in this narrative is critical. Southern Democrats used economic threats to intimidate newly enfranchised African Americans and Republican-leaning whites in the 1860s and 1870s on a wide scale.⁵ Yet, because many white Americans harbored the racist assumption that African Americans were inherently dependent and thus more susceptible to persuasion, this form of coercion did not produce the same rhetoric of crisis as did the intimidation of white workingmen in northern states. Instead of linking the intimidation taking place in both regions, labor and leftist leaders largely ignored the existence of economic coercion in the South. By making white northern factory workers into the ur-example of the coerced workingman, these advocates limited the rhetorical scope of the problem and circumscribed the possible solutions.

At the urging of socialist, labor, and reform leaders, states everywhere except the deep South sought to combat economic voter intimidation by passing secret ballot laws between 1888-1892. The secret ballot solution emerged from these advocates' "labor problem" concerns. It protected the independence and citizenship of laboring men by concealing their insufficient manhood behind a cloak of legal secrecy. By separating the workplace and the polling place, the secret ballot dramatically reduced the incidence of economic voter intimidation and rendered it no longer a threat to democracy or capitalism. Coercion of workingmen returned as a major issue during the contentious presidential election of 1896 when many large employers came to believe that Democratic nominee William Jennings Bryan's free silver platform threatened their

⁵ "A System of Coercion," *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), August 22, 1876, 4. For a representative case in the South see: *Watson v. Black*, Contested Election Case Files, House of Representatives Committee on Elections, 50th Congress, Record Group HR53A-F.9.10, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

prosperity. The new protections offered by the secret ballot, however, meant that employers had to innovate less effective forms of coercion that focused on employees' political speech rather than their votes. Economic voter intimidation still happened after 1896, especially in the South where secret ballot laws lagged, but it was no longer a real or rhetorical crisis.

Historiography

Coercion of working-class voters by employers has received little attention from historians and political scientists, despite its effect on American election laws, politics, and political culture in the late nineteenth century. In 1986 political scientist Peter Argersinger assessed the state of history and political science scholarship on election fraud in the Gilded Age. While late-nineteenth century politics had been the subject of extensive revisionist studies in the preceding decades, he singled out one area in particular as needing further research and analysis. That area was the legally and ethically contested set of coercive practices that employers and politicians used to exploit voters' economic dependence on others. Argersinger argued that earlier scholarship had erred by classifying cases of "employers warning their employees of possible unemployment" if they voted against the candidates their bosses chose as a form of bribery, rather than intimidation.⁶ This mis-classification had limited research on economic voter intimidation despite its importance for understanding the interactions between the growth of

⁶ Peter H. Argersinger, "New Perspectives on Election Fraud in the Gilded Age," *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 4 (1985): 669-87, 673. See also: Albie Burke, "Federal Regulation of Congressional Elections in Northern Cities, 1871-94," *The American Journal of Legal History* 14, no. 1 (1970): 17-34, Patrick F. Palermo, "The Rules of the Game: Local Republican Political Culture in the Gilded Age." *The Historian* 47, no. 4 (1985): 479-96, and Edward Foley, *Ballot Battles: The History of Disputed Elections in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

industrial capitalism and the unprecedented expansion of the electorate after the Civil War. Contemporary accounts—from labor leaders, third party politicians, and voters themselves—contained reams of evidence of the coercive nature of economic pressure, as well as its widespread existence throughout the nation. Argersinger briefly recounted some of this evidence and called for economic voter intimidation to "no longer be overlooked."⁷

In the thirty years since Argersinger's article, scholars of Gilded Age politics have capably expanded their studies of campaign tactics in a variety of directions. Yet, the topic of economic voter intimidation has never been the subject of an intensive study. The otherwise stellar work of John Francis Reynolds and Mark Wahlgren Summers mentioned the "bullying" of workers by factory owners only briefly.⁸ Meanwhile, political scientist Richard Bense's pathbreaking study of the act of voting through contested congressional election cases ran from the 1830s through the Civil War. During that period, economic voter intimidation was such an insubstantial element of politics that Bense explicitly excluded it as a category of analysis, arguing that "the parties had their own and more important fish to fry" than meddling in the

⁷ Argersinger, "New Perspectives," 677.

⁸ Summers noted that parties often chose factory owners as candidates because "a man who controlled so many people's livelihoods could control their votes, and in an age before the secret ballot, this was hard to prevent." Mark Wahlgren Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 101, Reynolds' study of New Jersey politics relied on newspaper reports, and while he found several references to employers "proselytizing among their employees," he believed that he could not "substantiate occasional accusations of intimidation or coercion" based on such sources. John Francis Reynolds, *Testing Democracy: Electoral Behavior and Progressive Reform in New Jersey, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 53; Richard McCormick's 1953 book on New Jersey politics devoted two chapters to bribery, but covered "the problem of the employed voter" in less than a paragraph. Richard Patrick McCormick, *The History of Voting in New Jersey; a Study of the Development of Election Machinery, 1664-1911* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 153. For more on congressional election campaigns see Jamie L. Carson, and Jason M. Roberts, "Strategic Politicians and U.S. House Elections, 1874-1914," *The Journal of Politics* 67, no. 2 (2005): 474-96.

relationship between employers and employees in those decades.⁹ While conditions had changed significantly by the 1870s, no scholar has undertaken a study comparable to Bensel's covering the Gilded Age.

Alexander Keyssar's influential synthesis of voting rights history offers a compelling argument as to why economic intimidation may have been neglected by modern scholarship. Keyssar argues that because historians and political scientists focused on the work of progressive reformers to protect and limit the franchise, they unwittingly adopted the biases and blindspots of the people they studied. Primarily wealthy northerners, these reformers sought to transform election laws to counter the bribery and fraud perpetrated by ethnic urban machines that had increased turnout by poor and ethnic-minority voters. Emphasizing how the lower classes corrupted the ballot, progressive reformers only "rarely mentioned abuses by employers," leading scholars to dismiss evidence of economic voter intimidation as unimportant.¹⁰ Intellectual historian Nancy Cohen delved into the ideologies of these reformers, showing how ostensibly liberal intellectuals like Henry Adams and E.L. Godkin viewed reforms like the secret ballot as a

⁹ Richard Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 79. For more on contested elections in this period see: Vincent M. Barnett, "Contested Congressional Elections in Recent Years," *Political Science Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (1939): 187-215, Jeffery A. Jenkins, "Partisanship and Contested Elections in the House of Representatives, 1789-2002," *Studies in American Political Development* 18 (2004), and Matthew N. Green, "Race, Party, and Contested Elections to the U.S. House of Representatives," *Polity* 39 (2) (2007). For details of these cases Chester Rowell's digest of contested elections through 1901 is essential reading. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Chester H. Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest of all the Contested Elections in the House of Representatives of the United States from the First to the Fifty-sixth Congress, 1789-1901*, 56th Cong., 2d Sess., 1901, Doc. No. 510. For a detailed breakdown of the importance of patronage politics, partisanship, and contested elections see: Frances E. Lee, "Patronage, Logrolls, and 'Polarization': Congressional Parties of the Gilded Age, 1876-1896," *Studies in American Political Development* 30 (October 2016), 116-127. For more on antebellum elections see: Glenn C. Altschuler, and Stuart M. Blumin, "Limits of Political Engagement in Antebellum America: A New Look at the Golden Age of Participatory Democracy," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 3 (1997): 855-85.

¹⁰ Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 130.

way to "limit political participation to the qualified."¹¹ Keyssar and Cohen acknowledged that these reformers overlooked the coercive nature of economic voter intimidation and the real protections for workingmen that the secret ballot offered, but they did not explore economic voter intimidation and its effect on ballot laws in any detail.

Labor historians have grappled extensively with the fraught connection between industrialization and democracy during the Gilded Age, yet they generally have not examined how capital influenced labor at the polling place. Rosanne Currarino explored how union leaders, politicians, and workingmen attempted to redefine citizenship for dependent wage workers as an economic and social, rather than merely political, status.¹² Currarino and other labor historians unearthed labor activists' fears that the era's deflationary depressions, low wages, persistent deflation, and high unemployment would render workers unable to fulfill their duties as citizens.¹³ Despite their interest in the changing nature of democracy and work in this era, however, none of these historians studied working-class men in the act of voting. For example,

¹¹ Nancy Cohen's *Reconstruction of American Liberalism* examines how liberal intellectuals and journalists responded to the failure of free labor ideology and the rise of working class democracy in the late-nineteenth century. She argues that the opposition of influential thinkers like Henry Adams and E. L. Godkin to true working class democracy shaped liberalism's response to social and labor reform movements during the Gilded Age. Nancy Cohen, *Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 55, 215, 228. See also Edward H. Miller, "They Vote Only for the Spoils: Massachusetts Reformers, Suffrage Restriction, and the 1884 Civil Service Law," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8, no. 3 (2009): 341-63.

¹² Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age*, Working Class in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011). Currarino built on Lawrence Glickman's study of the concept of a living wage, which emerged in the Gilded Age in response to the growing concern that "wage labor undermined the independence that lay at the root of republican manhood and republican citizenship." Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, New York; London, [England]: Cornell University Press, 1999), 23.

¹³ Glickman, *A Living Wage*, 3; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 22. For more on the political consequences of the financial panics of the era see: Leon Fink, *The Long Gilded Age: American Capitalism and the Lessons of a New World Order* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), and Bensel, *The Political Economy*.

Currarino and historians of working-class Chicago John Jentz and Richard Schneirov used a congressional investigation report that contained extensive allegations of economic intimidation in their books, yet did not make use of that line of testimony.¹⁴

The nature and extent of coercion in the post-Civil War United States has attracted increased historical attention in recent years. As historian Stacey Smith argued, "changing visions of coercion were just as central to the unfolding of the postwar era as changing visions of freedom."¹⁵ Uncovering how the coercion of employees by their employers operated and how it shaped American laws and society in the late-nineteenth century is an important step in understanding what Smith called the "boundaries of coercion" in the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ This dissertation explores how the boundaries of coercion that linked workplaces to polling places were created, enforced, challenged, and eventually overcome.

This is the first major study of the extent and effects of economic voter intimidation in the United States in the late-nineteenth century. I argue that democracy was in crisis between 1873 and 1896 and the economic voter intimidation of voters was a major front in the struggle over what it meant to be a voter, who deserved that right, and who deserved to be protected while casting a ballot. Americans of all walks of life, race, and political party were concerned that the

¹⁴ Jentz and Schneirov's discussion of coercion is limited to anti-labor organizing violence, primarily breaking up marches and strikes. Voter intimidation does not factor in their analysis. John B. Jentz and Richard Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital: Class, Politics, and Democracy during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 242. Currarino mines the House Committee testimony for the proposed solutions that workers and capitalists offered for the ongoing depression, and for worker opinions on the destructive nature of Chinese labor, Currarino, *The Labor Question in America*, 12, 37-8.

¹⁵ Stacey L. Smith, "Emancipating Peons, Excluding Coolies: Reconstructing Coercion in the American West," in Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur, *The World the Civil War Made* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 46-75, 49.

¹⁶ Smith, "Emancipating Peons," 47.

forces unleashed by industrial capitalism would overwhelm democracy. The enfranchisement of African American men after the Civil War prompted a nationwide fight over whether biracial democracy weakened the privileged status and manhood of white men. That debate interacted with and informed the conflict over whether or not wage working men possessed sufficient manliness to be entrusted with the franchise.

Across the nation, thousands of workingmen succumbed to discharge threats and cast employer-approved ballots, or fought back against their foremen at the polls and were cast into unemployment. Labor and reform advocates, Democratic, Republican, and Populist politicians, employers, and ordinary workingmen argued over what economic voter intimidation meant for the continuance of universal manhood suffrage and wage labor capitalism. Understanding the nature and extent of economic voter intimidation in the Gilded Age offers historians new insight into the era-defining "labor problem" as a concern that pervaded polling places as well as workplaces. It also sheds light on the rhetorical connections between forms of voter intimidation that pervaded the North and South during the waning days of Reconstruction and demonstrates that Americans demanded secrecy at the polls specifically to counter economic voter intimidation. In 1873, no Americans enjoyed complete and compulsory secrecy at the polls. By 1896, ninety-two percent of Americans voted in secret.¹⁷

¹⁷ William D. Harpine, *From the Front Porch to the Front Page: McKinley and Bryan in the 1896 Presidential Campaign*, 1st ed. Presidential Rhetoric Series; No. 13 (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005), 20.

Defining Intimidation

Intimidation was a difficult concept for Americans to define in the late-nineteenth century, and it remains a contested term in the twenty-first century. In 1876, Horace White, the Editor in Chief and owner of the *Chicago Tribune*, posed the question: "What is intimidation?" White's answer was simple, if frustrating. Intimidation, he explained, "is a word of very broad scope. It embraces everything from the fear of death to the loss of social position." The breadth of events that could fall into the category of intimidation, including what White referred to as the threat of "loss of employment," made it an inherently difficult concept to address through the law. This compared to the relatively easy task of spotting election fraud. After all, White noted, "it is not difficult to determine whether... a person has voted who was not entitled to vote, whether a poll has been altered after the votes have been counted." While those crimes were questions of fact, "intimidation is a matter of opinion, of guesswork, of uncertainty."¹⁸ The difficulty of spotting intimidation at the polls led a different Illinois newspaper to propose, in 1877, that "votes cast under such circumstances, whether of direct or indirect intimidation, are valid, and should be counted."¹⁹ States should do their best to stop intimidation and punish the intimidators of course, but once the ballots went in the box, the paper argued, it was impossible to determine how they got there and so it was better for everyone to just move on and treat all ballots as legitimate.

¹⁸ Horace White, "Letter to the Editor-Intimidation as an Element in Politics," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 2, 1876, 9.

¹⁹ "Bulldozing in the North," *The Daily Argus* (Rock Island, IL), January 6, 1877, 4.

Congressman George Washington McCrary (R-IA) sought to solve this problem, and many others that troubled elections, by publishing a *Treatise on the American Law of Elections* in 1875. The first comprehensive treatise on American election law, McCrary's treatise eventually went through four editions. Building on both congressional and British precedents, McCrary defined intimidation as "a display of force as ought to have intimidated men of ordinary firmness."²⁰ McCrary's standard effectively substituted the judgment of congressmen or judges for that of the voters themselves. It was up to these men to determine whether the intimidation that voters were subjected to "ought" to have caused them to feel fear. Whether the prospective voters said it *had* made them fear for their jobs, homes, or lives was not the decisive factor. Under McCrary's standard, what mattered was whether an idealized man "of ordinary firmness" would have been intimidated by such a threat. In judging whether a discharge threat from an employer to his employee constituted illegal intimidation, adjudicators following McCrary's standard passed judgment not just on the economic and political circumstances surrounding the voter, but also on the firmness of his manhood. When it came to economic forms of intimidation, the House Committee on Elections often found, as it did in an 1880 contested election case, that discharge threats "hardly constitute such an overthrow of men's wills and determinations as can be taken notice of by the law."²¹ The Committee's verdict, essentially, was that all voters had a duty as men to oppose attempts to intimidate them and if they did not have the manly will to

²⁰ George W. McCrary, *A Treatise on the American Law of Elections*, First Edition (Keokuk, Iowa: R.B. Ogden, Chicago: E.D. Myers., 1875), 314. George McCrary was the father of Frank McCrary, the probation officer who refused to be coerced in 1906 whose story was related in the dissertation introduction.

²¹ Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest*, 373.

shrug off threats to their livelihoods then they had not been safe holders of the franchise to begin with.

McCrary's treatise did not end the debate over what constituted intimidation, particularly when it came to non-violent forms of coercion. The indirect and deniable nature of economic intimidation served to conceal its pernicious effects from legal attention and enforcement. The *Boston Daily Globe* explained in 1890 that "the extent to which the intimidation of workingmen by their employers has been carried on in this country in former years, can hardly be appreciated, because of the many indirect and covert ways by which it has been accomplished."²² The lack of violence, extended time span in which it took place, and seeming reciprocity inherent in the relationship between employers and employees explained why in 1896 the House Committee on Elections exhaustively called it "quiet intimidation" and despaired of ever fully combatting it.²³

Throughout this dissertation I have adopted the modern Department of Justice legal standard to determine which encounters between employers and employees to treat as economic voter intimidation and which should be classified as bribery, fraud, or simple campaigning. The DOJ defines voter intimidation as any effort to "deter or influence voting activity through threats to deprive voters of something they already have." In a case of intimidation, someone with power

²² "Democracy and a Free Ballot," *Boston Daily Globe*, November 19, 1890, 4.

²³ Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest*, 520.

threatens someone with less power to get them to change their vote. Intimidation requires a threat and a fear.²⁴

I have found that contemporary observers and historians frequently confused instances of what I consider to be economic intimidation with bribery. Bribery, the DOJ explains, is the "functional opposite" of intimidation. Bribery requires a reciprocal and consensual relationship: the corrupt voter receives something of value—three dollars, a glass of whiskey, a new job—while the briber receives a vote for his chosen candidates.²⁵ Voters who accept a bribe are acting out of greed, not out of fear. The collected testimony of hundreds of workers, labor advocates, and politicians contained in this dissertation demonstrates that the economic pressures levied against workingmen as they approached the polls in the Gilded Age were not reciprocal. While money may have changed hands in the form of wages, the workers had already earned those wages through their labor. This dissertation explores the methods that employers used to exploit their employees' fear of losing the wages they had earned through their labor to control their votes. It then examines how Americans, worried about the coexistence of wage labor with

²⁴ Richard Bense's pathbreaking book on contested election cases offers the best analysis of voting practices in the nineteenth century and has been a critical guide in how I have theorized this project. Bense defines economic intimidation in much the same terms as I and the DOJ do here. Yet Bense determined that in the era he was investigating, 1850-1868, economic voter intimidation was not a widespread factor in the corruption of voters. Richard Franklin Bense, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 77-80.

²⁵ Craig C. Donsanto, Nancy L. Simmons, and United States Department of Justice. Public Integrity Section, *Federal Prosecution of Election Offenses*. 7th Ed., Rev. Aug. 2007. ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Public Integrity Section, 2007), 54. Nineteenth century English law defined them similarly: "that which it would be bribery to promise the enjoyment of it is intimidation to threaten the deprivation of." It also held that "the wrongful dismissal by an employer of a single voter from his employment shortly before an election, upon the ground of his political opinion, is evidence of intimidation." Miles Walker Mattinson and Stuart Cunningham Macaskie, *The Law Relating to Corrupt Practices at Elections and the Practice on Election Petitions* (London: Waterlow and Sons Limited, London Wall, E.C., 1883), 50, 52.

democracy, interpreted the meaning of the coercion taking place in workplaces and polling places across the nation.

When it came to the American workplace, the boundaries between legitimate campaigning and coercive demands were hazy at best. A treatise on employment law published in 1896 specified that for an employer to justifiably fire his employee, "the act of disobedience... must involve injury to the master."²⁶ Voting against their boss' chosen candidate did not, in the perspective of workingmen, injure their employer. But many businessmen in the 1870s and 1880s disagreed. They believed that the election of a particular candidate or party would damage their interests, and so insisted that an employee voting against their interests constituted a material harm. It was unclear whose interpretation of employment and election law was more correct, but the ethics mattered little in the workplace. Employers enjoyed so much power and control over their employees, and workingmen were so terrified of being discharge and thrown into an abbreviated life of poverty, that they often had little recourse. They had to vote the way their bosses wanted or risk losing their jobs.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation begins after the disastrous financial Panic of 1873, when employers increasingly began to take political advantage of the economic and legal precariousness of their growing numbers of wage working employees. The second chapter is organized thematically — it explores the methods and forms of economic voter intimidation that employers used between

²⁶ Walter Checkley Tiffany, and William Lawrence Clark, *Handbook On the Law of Persons And Domestic Relations* (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Co., 1896), 470.

1874-1892. Subsequent chapters retrace the years between 1877 and 1890, the critical thirteen years in which Democratic newspapers, labor organizers, and politicians of both major parties reacted to, exploited, and sought to combat the threat that this form of coercion posed to capitalism and democracy. The dissertation concludes with a chapter on the presidential election campaign of 1896, the last election in which economic voter intimidation was an issue of national importance.

Chapter one traces the economic, political, and legal conditions that converged in the 1870s to make widespread economic voter intimidation possible. The unprecedented financial panics that began in 1873 periodically dumped tens of thousands of workingmen into unemployment and starvation until 1897. Even when the labor market improved and work was plentiful, men working for wages were painfully aware that their jobs were dependent on the whims of their employers. A different sort of precariousness met voters at the polls. Americans voted mostly in the open in the nineteenth century. Workingmen were painfully aware that every move they made at the polls could be observed. Outlawing intimidation itself was an ineffective deterrent, as the same pressures that controlled employees at the polls kept them from the witness box. The post-Civil War years were also a time of intensely close partisan struggle with high stakes—government contracts, monetary policies, tariff rates—that employers cared about. In the 1870s and 1880s, employers enjoyed extensive control over their employees in their workplaces and found it easy and financially or politically rewarding to extend that power into the polling place.

Chapter two explores the reality of economic voter intimidation, examining how employers coerced their employees, where it happened, and why the accounts of mass coercion in the 1870s and 1880s are broadly believable. Employers used two methods to economically intimidate their employees: they threatened to fire them, and they watched or controlled their behavior at the polls. The most effective intimidators used both. Economic voter intimidation was a massive problem in the 1870s and 1880s. Employees reported being coerced in every industry and in nearly every state. Some claims may have been manufactured or embellished, particularly when they were repeated in the partisan press. Many of them, however, appear in sources that have nothing at all to do with politics or in contexts that did not offer partisan or personal advantage to the testifier. This chapter then explores the methods of coercion and how the physical or legal architecture of worksites such as company towns and navy yards could enhance or change how employers coerced their employees.

Chapter three argues that economic voter intimidation became a national crisis in the mid-late 1870s because the men who were being threatened were white. Contested congressional election case files, special congressional elections, and newspaper articles contain hundreds of accounts of threats levied against African American sharecroppers, laborers, and businessmen from the 1860s through the 1890s. Such coercion continued well into the twentieth century as well. Yet, when economically precarious white workers began to be subjected en masse to the same forms coercion after the Panic of 1873, politicians and labor leaders suddenly worried that manhood suffrage could be unstable in a wage working capitalist nation. Adding to the crisis atmosphere were the bad faith efforts of the Democratic press to stigmatize economic voter

intimidation as a uniquely northern and Republican crime. This campaign was remarkably effective. By 1879, when Americans spoke of economic voter intimidation and the need for protective legislation, the primary example of a coerced employee they referenced was a white factory worker coerced by Republican bosses, not an African American sharecropper threatened by Democratic bankers or landowners.

Chapter four argues that reform and labor leaders, most prominently Henry George and Terence Powderly, attacked economic voter intimidation as part of their broader efforts to build a more just society for poor and precarious American workingmen. The emergence of the coercion crisis, both in its real and rhetorical forms, posed a substantial threat to the nation's relatively new experiment in universal manhood suffrage. Because it struck at white workingmen's independence, manhood, and whiteness, economic voter intimidation seemed to undermine their standing as full citizens and their right to vote. Labor advocates like George and Powderly, along with dozens of lesser known leaders, argued that the consequences of unchecked economic voter intimidation could include the collapse of democracy or socialist revolution.

Chapter five explores the emergence of the secret ballot as the preferred solution to the coercion crisis. Labor and reform leaders latched onto ballot secrecy as a tool to separate workingmen's workplaces from their polling places, thus protecting the seemingly fragile institutions of democracy and capitalism. By cloaking the ballot that workingmen cast in secrecy, labor advocates believed that they could prevent their economic dependence from impugning their manhood and thus their ability to enjoy the rights of full citizenship. By forcibly connecting wage working industrial capitalism to universal manhood suffrage, economic voter intimidation

had convinced many Americans that neither could survive the influence of the other. The secret ballot offered a way to restore the manhood of workingmen, protect democracy, and prevent the growth of more radical challenges to capitalism.

Chapter six argues that not only the idea of ballot secrecy, but its enactment at the state level, was in large part a product of labor/leftist activism on the issue of economic voter intimidation. Scholars have understandably focused on Massachusetts, the first state to enact ballot secrecy statewide. Yet, this focus has cloaked the importance of the coercion issue in the secret ballot debate. Because Massachusetts adopted ballot secrecy quickly and with little opposition, the case offers little sense of which arguments for and against were most persuasive. In states where the enactment of ballot secrecy was more difficult, where it was held up by legislative blockades and governors' vetoes, the arguments went on far longer and were distilled to their essence. In two of those early enacting states where the secret ballot did not come easily — Connecticut and New York — labor leaders advocated forcefully against what they saw as coercion's threat to the political independence of working-class voters. As the secret ballot bills made their tortuous way towards enactment in the late 1880s, socialist newspapers, Knights of Labor assemblies, local and statewide unions, and ordinary workingmen from every trade made the case to their representatives that, despite its potential problems, ballot secrecy was an absolute necessity to protect them from the coercion of their employers. The secret ballot laws passed in the late-1880s and early 1890s transformed the landscape of American voting in both positive and negative ways: erecting barriers to poor and illiterate voters and reducing turnout, while simultaneously offering unprecedented protection to those voters still qualified to go to the

polls. While the regressive elements of the secret ballot have often captured scholarly attention, ordinary workingmen, socialist politicians, and union leaders all agreed that it was a necessary reform to stop economic voter intimidation.

Chapter seven tells the narrative of both the reality and the rhetoric of coercion during the 1896 presidential election campaign. With approximately ninety-two percent of American voters protected by the secret ballot by 1896, the issue of voter coercion seemed primed to disappear from political culture.²⁷ Despite the secret ballot's protections, however, employer coercion resurged as a potent political issue during the particularly contentious 1896 election. Robbed of the ability to observe their employees directly at the polls, employers focused their coercive energies on their men's political expression before election day. Bosses used discharge threats, highly suggestive public surveys, and demands that employees participate in public displays of affection for the Republican candidate to impress upon them the political stance that their workplace wanted them to take. Democratic newspapers and politicians took up the charge of coercion and, while it was real to some extent, enlarged it in their rhetoric into an existential threat. Their arguments were similar to that of labor advocates in the 1880s: coercion threatened the manhood, independence, and citizenship of workingmen. In the highly charged political atmosphere of 1896, these charges stuck. The backlash to coercion allegations, combined with workingmen's growing faith in the protections of ballot secrecy and a decline in political competitiveness, brought the coercion crisis to an end with the turn of the century.

²⁷ Harpine, *From the Front Porch*, 20.

Chapter One: "The Reasonable Fear:" The Causes and Context of the Crisis

"Well, well what is all this talk about hard times? *I've* got plenty of money." In the comic rant that begins with this thoughtless declaration, journalist/humorist Lucius A. Stockwell, in the persona of a hard-nosed industrialist, inadvertently described the economic, political and legal factors that increased voter coercion in the late-nineteenth century. Stockwell's work of satire was published in *The American Nonconformist* in 1892, at the peak of the coercion crisis. The fake industrialist details at tedious length how he makes his money by manipulating tariff and railroad rates to corner a monopoly on cattle. He squeezes and defrauds small farmers, railroad workers, and wage-working meatpackers as much as he can get away with. And this fictional but all too believable industrialist can get away with a lot thanks to his investment of "\$100,000 for campaign purposes, to be divided equally between the democrats and republicans." Taking credit for the governor of New York's recent decision to veto a secret ballot bill, Stockwell's industrialist crows that he and his pals "can watch the field and turn the election whichever way we think best as New York is a critical state and always decides the election."¹ The themes that emerge from this biting sarcastic article—economic depression and inequality, extremely close elections, and a lack of legal protections for voters at the polls—are the factors that contributed to the emergence of a crisis of economic voter intimidation between 1873 and 1896. This chapter argues that employers in a variety of industries throughout the nation took advantage of these changing economic, legal, and political circumstances to economically intimidate their employees during elections.

¹ Lucius A. Stockwell, "Phil. Armour's Soliloquy," *The American Nonconformist*, June 16, 1892, 6.

Between 1873 and 1896, wage workers had good reason to fear the results if they did not accede to their employers' threats. Millions of enfranchised male workers depended on their employers for their daily wages. Discharge from employment often meant starvation. It was entirely reasonable for workers to fear that defying their employers politically could have dire consequences. A different fear met them at the polling place, where they lacked any semblance of secrecy in casting their ballots and state and federal prosecutors failed to enforce anti-intimidation laws against coercive employers. Precarious at work and insecure at the polls, workers were relatively easy targets for employers. And in an era of extremely narrow election margins, it was eminently worthwhile for a boss who had a stake in an election to attempt to sway the votes of his employees. For the nearly three decades in which economic precarity, public voting with no legal protection, and close political competition all persisted, economic voter intimidation was a real threat to thousands of Americans.

The Economic Precariousness of Wage Laborers

Contemporary observers described the economic and social crises that emerged in the 1870s as the "Labor Crisis," "Labor Problem," or "Labor Question."² The proximate cause of the "Labor Problem" was a series of recessions that undermined the prosperity and security of wage workers. Most important among them was the Panic of 1873, which caused unprecedented

² See Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age, Working Class in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

nationwide devastation.³ In the starving winter of 1873-4 over 90,000 desperate homeless New Yorkers crowded into the city's lodging houses.⁴ For those lucky enough to remain employed in the hard years after the panic, wages declined by as much as half from their pre-1873 peak.⁵

As more and more Americans became reliant on a daily wage, they became more and more vulnerable to the vagaries of the business cycle. The "prolonged deflationary crisis," labor historian David Montgomery's term for the Long Depression, ravaged much of the American economy between 1873 and 1897, but it hit contingent wage workers worst of all.⁶ While the ranks of labor unions had been expanding at the start of the 1870s, leading to a series of small

³ For more on the causes of the crisis see John M. Lubetkin, *Jay Cooke's Gamble: The Northern Pacific Railroad, the Sioux, and the Panic of 1873* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006) and Nicolas Barreyre, "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 4 (2011): 403-23.

⁴ Edward T. O'Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 88.

⁵ O'Donnell, *Henry George*, 89. Many scholars describe the economic life of the nation in this era as typified by rapid expansion punctuated by a series of financial panics in 1873, 1882, 1887, 1890, and 1893. Each panic produced a collapse in prices and a recession of varying length and intensity, with the worst lasting from 1873 to 1879 or so. Other scholars, most notably historians Eric Hobsbawm, Nicolas Barreyre, and Richard Schneirov, emphasize that the recessions in the US are best understood as part of a worldwide "Long Depression" lasting from 1873 to 1897 or 1898. Schneirov summed up the persistence of economic precarity by noting that during these decades the nation experienced more months of depression than prosperity. Barreyre emphasized that the 1873 depression kicked off "the longest contraction of business in [the nation's] young history," Barreyre, "The Politics of," 408; Eric Hobsbawm, and Francis Newton, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 35; Barreyre, "The Politics of Economic Crises," 403; Richard Schneirov, "Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873—1898," *Journal of Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5 (July 2006): 189—224. For an early and interesting discussion of the Long Depression theory see Rendigs Fels, "The Long-Wave Depression, 1873-97," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 31, no. 1 (1949): 69-73. Richard Schneirov, "Uncovering the Contradictions in Samuel Gompers's 'More:' Reading 'What Does Labor Want?'" *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18 (1), 2019, Cambridge University Press: 99–119, 101. See also Montgomery, *The Fall*, 51

⁶ Montgomery, *The Fall*, 4; Labor historians John Jentz and Richard Schneirov argued that the Panic of 1873 paradoxically kicked off "three decades of deflation and instability combined with economic growth," Jentz, and Schneirov. *Chicago in the Age*, 156. Historian Heather Cox Richardson explained that "Competition for jobs in a flooded labor market meant below subsistence wages for many unskilled workers." Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, 188.

but meaningful strike victories, the Panic of 1873 virtually annihilated them.⁷ In 1886, *The Labor Herald*, the official paper of the Knights of Labor in Richmond, Virginia, called on American workingmen to arm themselves against the devastation visited on their families by the frequent commercial panics, which the *Labor Herald* called "periodic visitations of a bourgeois providence." The article asked workingmen to consider their precarious situation: "how many weeks of enforced idleness separate you from utter destitution?" Dependent on "the law of demand" for their employment, wage workers had little recourse when work dried up after each panic.⁸ In the words of historian Edward T. O'Donnell, "employers enjoyed unprecedented power" over their employees in these decades.⁹

With only shaky and incomplete production and unemployment numbers available from the era, economic historians continue to debate the nature and extent of the panics and depressions in this era.¹⁰ What is not up for debate is that one stockbroker's description of the 1873 crash as "the worst disaster since the Black Death" was an exaggeration, but considering the widespread suffering that resulted, it was not an entirely absurd one.¹¹ The Gilded Age economy, historian Richard White explained, "conditioned workers to endure a quota of

⁷ New York City's labor unions went from a reported membership of 45,000 in 1873 to less than 5,000 in 1878, O'Donnell, *Henry George*, 88.

⁸ Lum, "American Workingmen are Called Upon to Arm Themselves," *The Labor Herald* (Richmond, VA), May 1, 1886, 1. As Mark Summers explained, depressions "hit hardest those whose financial security rested most completely in the hands of others, the employees of corporations and the day laborers on construction projects that financial insecurity had made impossible." Summers, *Party Games*, 183.

⁹ O'Donnell, *Henry George*, 89.

¹⁰ Economist J.R. Vernon calculated that the unemployment rate rose from 3.99 in 1873 to 8.25 in 1878 and 6.59 in 1879. According to his calculations it then hovered between 3.29 and 5.01 through the 1880s before spiking back up to a high of 8.19 in 1896 during the mid-1890s recession. J.R. Vernon, "Unemployment Rates in Postbellum America: 1869–1899," *Journal of Macroeconomics* 16, no. 4 (1994): 701–14, 710.

¹¹ Christopher Nitschke, "Theory and History of Financial Crises: Explaining the Panic of 1873," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 17 (2018), 221–240, 227.

misery."¹² The ever-increasing ranks of wage workers became convinced that they were unwilling participants in an erratic economy that could plunge into recession and leave them unemployed and vulnerable at any time.¹³ Even in relatively prosperous years, 15-20% of wage workers could expect to spend three to four months unemployed. Those months often came during the winter when families were most in need of clothes, food, and fuel.¹⁴

The years of turmoil during the Long Depression changed the nature of labor and capital. The logics of industrial capitalism and the pressure of constant panics pushed firms to combine into massive corporations. Industrial consolidation boosted productivity in some industries, but it also created millions of low-wage, precarious jobs in ever-larger factories, mines, and mills. Historian Eric Foner described the years that followed the Panic of 1873 as defined by an "inexorable tendency toward the mechanization of industry and a larger scale of production."¹⁵ In some industries the result was total monopolization— in 1880 the Standard Oil Company controlled 90-95% of American oil refining.¹⁶ Throughout the entire American economy between 1860 and 1890, the number of incorporated companies increased by 36% while the number of employees increased by a staggering 248%.¹⁷ Economic concentration did not produce monopolies in every industry, and the biggest combinations took place in the late 1890s.

¹² Richard White, *The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 803.

¹³ Montgomery, *The Fall*, 46-50.

¹⁴ White, *The Republic*, 803. Vernon determined that factory work was the most cyclically volatile form of employment during this era, contributing greatly to the precariousness of industrial workers as they went to the polls in the Gilded Age. Vernon, "Unemployment Rates," 709.

¹⁵ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 477.

¹⁶ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire*, 43.

¹⁷ Samuel Bernstein, "American Labor in the Long Depression, 1873-1878," *Science & Society* 20, no. 1 (1956): 59-83, 63.

However, the tendency towards bigger firms and more complex corporate structures had an undeniable effect on the efficiency and form of the workplaces that American laborers inhabited.

When the economy collapsed in 1873, increasingly desperate workers flooded a contracting labor market, simultaneously increasing unemployment and driving down wages. This influx of desperate workers combined with the trend towards large companies to produce a class structure of dependent labor on a mass scale. Workers themselves were often quite well aware of how economic circumstances were conspiring against them during these years. In 1879, nearly six years after the beginning of the Panic, a Select Committee of the House of Representatives set out to learn the "causes of the general depression in labor and business."¹⁸ More than merely investigating the ongoing "prostration" of labor, the committee was also empowered to "devise and propose measures for relief" based on conversations with everyday Americans during its members' cross-country tour. Workers and union representatives testified to the visiting congressmen that the problems they faced were not limited to the type of coinage in circulation. Men who labored for wages in the late-1870s held a bleak view of their prospects for advancement in the new American economy.

When the committee arrived in Chicago, Illinois, its members sought the opinions of a cross-section of the city's elite, including bankers, lawyers, stockbrokers, and factory owners. The wealthy men who testified on the first day generally denied any need for federal action. They noted that "everything was prosperous here until 1873" aside from the "purely local"

¹⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives. *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of General Depression in Labor and Business; and as to Chinese Immigration*, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 5, 1-3. Hereafter *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*.

suffering caused by the 1871 Great Fire.¹⁹ The head cashier of the National Bank of Chicago testified that while the panic had been severe, there had been a "general improvement in all branches of industry" which would, "if undisturbed in its course," bring employment to "the idle labor of the country."²⁰ One after another these prosperous men told the committee that "those who were willing to work can get work," and suggested that the congressmen should confine their inquiry to the omnipresent debate over the currency issue. Even when Jonathan Scammon, one of the most prominent industrialists and railroad builders in the city, acknowledged the continued severity of the depression, he placed the blame on the "volume of the currency," eschewing other potential factors such as industrial overproduction, low wages, and economic inequality.²¹

In contrast, the laborers, union representatives, and journalists who testified before the committee emphasized the ongoing plight of workingmen who feared that economic stability would never return. D.R. Streeter, appearing as the representative of the Council of Trade and Labor in Chicago which encompassed twenty-seven trade-unions, presented the committee with detailed statistical accounts of the decline in wages and employment across a variety of industries. When questioned about his reports, which showed an average of a thirty-three percent decline in wages since 1872 and a massive increase in unemployment, he remarked that his fellow workers were "in a very bad condition" that would only worsen during the coming

¹⁹ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 11.

²⁰ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 17.

²¹ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 52, 61. Jentz and Schneirov made use of this committee's recorded testimony to describe the economic conditions that prompted the evolution of working class politics in Chicago. Yet, despite quoting the testimony by elite Chicagoans about the state of the economy, they made no reference whatsoever to the later testimony that described voter intimidation. Jentz and Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age*, 169.

winter.²² Streeter was unequivocal in his testimony, while "the gentlemen here yesterday" may have felt "an improvement in business... and there may be more money in the banks, we have none of it."²³ A printer named P.H. McLogan echoed Streeter's testimony a few minutes later, describing the condition of labor as "more depressed than it has been since the panic."²⁴ One congressman, evincing little sympathy for the unskilled workers McLogan was describing, asked whether the out of work laborers were trying to find jobs or were unwilling to work at all. McLogan asserted that they were unemployed because they could not get employment no matter how hard they tried.

These witnesses emphasized to the committee that the labor problem was radicalizing workers who had come to believe that prosperity would never return. William Halley, a printer, journalist, and member of the National Greenback-Labor Party, appeared before the committee as a representative of the "laboring, producing, and trading classes" to, as he put it, "tell you of their sufferings."²⁵ For Halley, the awful conditions laborers endured were no accident. The

²² *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 112.

²³ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 111; Economic historians have generally concurred with Streeter's view, finding that wages were still declining as of 1879 and did not bottom out at their 1860 level and begin rebounding until the following year. Jentz and Schneirov, writing in 2012, calculated an almost identical wage decline during the depression to what Streeter described in 1879, and estimated that approximately one-third of all workers lost their jobs nationwide. Jentz and Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age*, 155. For more on the Panic see also: Barreyre, "The Politics of," 409; and Kuczynski, *A Short History*, 79-81. Economist Patrick Newman applied an Austrian School approach to the panic and determined that "there was no prolonged depression in the 1870s." Instead, Newman argues, people merely thought there was. Newman acknowledges that wages fell 16.11% between 1873 and 1879 and unemployment probably reached 8.25%, but he argues that because prices fell with wages, unemployed workers were probably quickly rehired as economic activity resumed, and contemporary observers had access to only flawed and limited data, people overestimated the dire nature of the depression. When it comes to a fear of precariousness, however, perception matters, and for workingmen who had been fired, lost wages, or saw their friends become tramps, the fear of economic destruction in these years was real and lasting. Patrick Newman, "Late 19th and Early 20th Century United States Business Cycles and Monetary Policy," (Ph.D. Diss., George Mason University, 2016), 31-37.

²⁴ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 116-117.

²⁵ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 75.

combination of rapacious capitalists and corrupt legislators—"evil brood of lawyer-politicians"—had "degraded" labor to such a degree that without significant reforms the more radical voices amongst the workers would gain a ready audience.²⁶ Halley proposed a series of sweeping reforms — a federal bureau of labor, the right to unionize, free land grants, an expanded currency, and, most important of all, protection at the ballot box, where "the employment of laboring men is threatened" if workingmen dared to oppose their bosses.²⁷ Halley denounced communists and other incendiaries but testified approvingly of the growing Socialistic Labor Party. He believed they understood the dire nature of the problems facing workingmen, including their loss of political independence.

Unemployment forced many wage workers to go on the road, adding the loss of home and community to their sense of economic instability. The Pennsylvania Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 1874 that "[p]robably never in the history of the country has there been a time, when so many of the working classes, skilled and unskilled, have been moving from place to place seeking employment that was not to be had- never certainly for so long a time."²⁸ The consolidation of industry into fewer and larger corporations contributed to this conundrum. As a Pennsylvania laborer wrote to the House committee investigating the depression, "the farmers and the operators of the manufactories and mines of our country... were the only employers of labor in the land—they contributed everything the laborers consumed." When employers cut wages and threatened to fire those who complained, "the laboring people wisely yielded to

²⁶ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 79-80.

²⁷ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 82.

²⁸ Samuel, Bernstein, "American Labor," 60.

necessity and accepted the wages offered to them."²⁹ Even when organized labor was able to overcome threats, violence, and fear of discharge to spark strikes against the draconian wage cuts, the majority of them failed outright.³⁰

The labor market was in such bad condition that it forced the introduction of a new word to the American vocabulary. As iron moulder George Rogers told the congressional committee in Chicago, "previous to 1873 such a thing as a tramp was not known in the country," but as Rogers and several witnesses testified, there was now a large body of tramps roaming the outskirts of Chicago looking for work.³¹ Even when laborers were able to maintain employment in a market drastically "overstocked with labor," the economic conditions and tightfistedness of their bosses forced many of them to accept punishing wage cuts or risk joining the ranks of tramps.³²

Nationwide, bosses on construction sites noted an overabundance of day laborers clamoring for jobs without regard for good pay or working conditions. In 1878, a master builder and mason commented during a contested election case in Oswego, New York, on the "great many men... seeking employment as common laborers" in the late fall, just as the first snows simultaneously shuttered outdoor worksites and turned cold and hungry families particularly desperate.³³ The image below (Figure 1.1) from *Harper's Weekly* depicting the various types of tramps that were familiar figures on American streets demonstrates their prevalence. The caricature in the top left of the cartoon—"The Tramp who never thought he'd come to this"—is a particularly poignant

²⁹ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 451.

³⁰ Bernstein, "American Labor," 64.

³¹ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 124.

³² *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 116.

³³ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Sebastian Duffy v. Joseph Mason Papers and Documents for the Twenty-Fourth Congressional District of New York*. 46th Cong., 1st Sess., 1879, Misc. Doc. 23, 348-350.

and telling image. The financial panics eroded the financial foundations of millions of Americans, including many who probably never thought they would "come to this." Becoming a tramp in the late-nineteenth century did not evince a moral failing, it could happen to anyone. With the consequences of unemployment so dire, workers would do anything to avoid losing their jobs and joining the ranks of the various kinds of tramps.³⁴

³⁴ For more on the etymology of "tramp" during the Gilded Age see David Quigley, *Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 169.

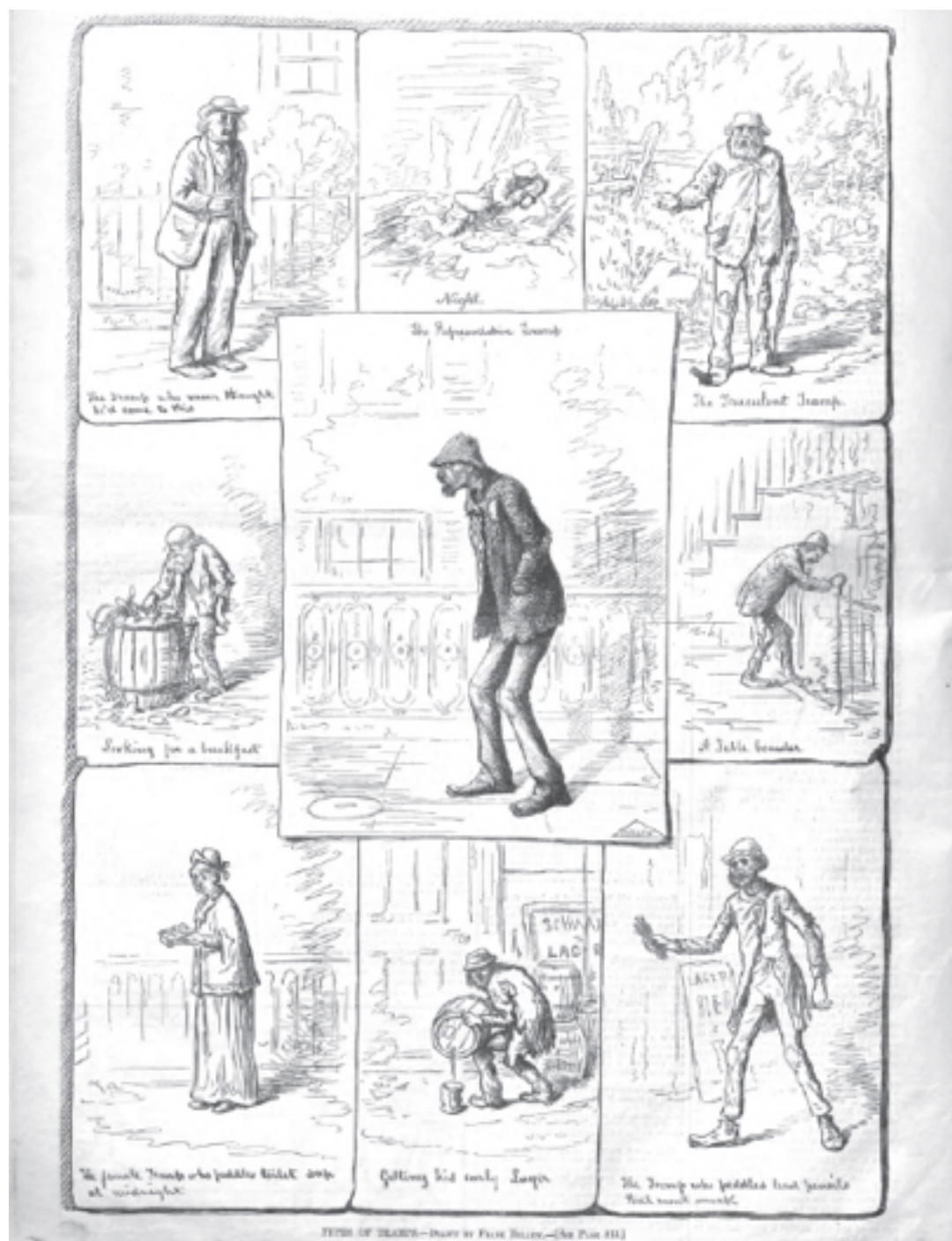


Figure 1.1: An 1878 *Harper's Weekly* cartoon depicting the varieties of tramps roaming the streets during the Long Depression. In the center of the image is the "Representative Tramp."³⁵

³⁵ Frank Belew, "Types of Tramps," *Harper's Weekly*, October 12, 1878, 816.

When wage working men walked to the polls in the 1870s and 1880s, they were well aware that thousands of men like them had been thrown into poverty after being discharged. In 1878, the Ohio State Board of Labor Statistics reported "the mass of producers were living in poverty."³⁶ Workers had come to believe that "[y]ears of steady employment, coupled with health and strength and the will to labor, was not and is not a guarantee to the laborer, that if sickness overtakes him he shall not become a pauper, or that when death comes that his children shall not be thrown upon the charity of the community."³⁷ In 1880, a shopkeeper who watched dozens of workingmen discharged from a New Jersey oil depot expressed his pity for "the poor fellows, for they are obliged to live up to the last penny of their incomes, and when a break occurs they are thrown flat on their backs."³⁸ The safety of workingmen's families were balanced on a knife edge, and defying an employer's political pronouncements could be just the thing that turned a stable worker into a tramp.

Even when relative prosperity returned, as it did periodically in these troubled decades, the knowledge that the labor market could be devastated at any time by forces outside of their control was profoundly unsettling to wage laborers. Reform advocate Henry George captured this fear in a draft of an article he wrote in 1886. Noting that conditions had improved lately for laborers, he emphasized that "nothing is more certain that under existing conditions this will

³⁶ Samuel, Bernstein, "American Labor," 72.

³⁷ Samuel, Bernstein, "American Labor," 72, 69.

³⁸ "Bulldozing For Garfield," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 31, 1880, 1.

again be followed by another paroxysm of depression sharper and more bitter than the last."³⁹

Parties took advantage of this fear in their campaign literature. As historian Charles W. Calhoun

described, in the closely fought 1880 national elections, Republicans claimed that the

Democratic Party's policy of low tariffs would "imperil the fragile recovery after the long

depression of the 1870s."⁴⁰ In New York's Eleventh Congressional District, the Republican

candidate sent out what one paper called "absurd images... showing a condition of extravagant

poverty" if his Democratic opponent was elected.⁴¹ Constantly reminded by political campaigns

or by fresh recessions of how precarious their jobs were, workers in every industry and section of

the nation knew that antagonizing their bosses could have disastrous consequences.

Labor leaders worried that the threat of unemployment and poverty undermined workers' ability to withstand political threats from their employers. While they were sure that workingmen would have rejected political threats in past decades, in the tough environment of the 1870s and 80s they were less certain. The national economy recovered and boomed for a short time in the first two years of the 1880s, but as soon as the expansion slowed in 1883, fears of precariousness reemerged. Joseph T. Finnerty, a brass worker and spokesperson for the Central Labor Union of New York, explained to a congressional investigative committee in 1885 that "all the brass worker cares about now is to hold his job, and he will put up with any kind of abuse as long as he

³⁹ Henry George, Unpublished Article, 1886, Henry George Papers, New York Public Library, Archives and Manuscripts Division.

⁴⁰ Charles W. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age*. 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 74.

⁴¹ In that New York Congressional election the tactic seemed to work, the Republican Levi P. Morton was comfortably reelected and later went on to serve as Vice President for Benjamin Harrison. "Untitled," *Truth* (New York, NY), November 1, 1880, np, Levi Parsons Morton Papers, Scrapbook 1B: 1878-1880, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

is not discharged." In the idyllic world of 1872, Finnerty claimed, things had been different, the brass worker back before the panic "would not stand any abuse at all then, and no abuse would be offered to him then; he was treated as a skilled workman."⁴² Regardless of the actual labor conditions, the knowledge of how bad things had been and how bad they could quickly become constrained workers from asserting their political independence.

The emergence of widespread labor precariousness after the Panic of 1873 had a profound effect on the ability of workingmen to resist the undue influence of their bosses at the polls. A Democratic poll watcher who had stood by the polls in Oswego, New York, for over twenty years described in an 1878 contested election case that "within the last four or five years, since the hard times began" economic intimidation of factory workers had become more common and more effective.⁴³ The "reasonable fear of loss of employment" was enough, an election contestant in Maine in 1880 alleged, to compel precarious workingmen to vote for the candidate favored by their employer.⁴⁴ During a campaign tour of Ohio in 1884, former Missouri Senator Carl Schurz noted that previously he had never "heard so much of the efforts of employers of labor...to dragoon their workingmen into voting as they dictated." Schurz knew that such things had happened before, but now economic intimidation seemed to be far more pervasive and effective. With "business being generally bad and the workingmen being in a somewhat apprehensive state of mind," Schurz explained that the "loud complaints" of workers

⁴² U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee, Volume 1—Testimony*, 48th Cong., 1885, 745.

⁴³ *Documents—Duffy vs. Mason*, 130.

⁴⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Testimony in the Contested Election Case of Samuel J. Anderson vs. Thomas B. Reed*, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., 1881, Mis. Doc. No. 13, 1.

at the loss of their "rights as citizens" had petered out and they generally acquiesced to their employers' coercion.⁴⁵

Even contemporary observers who denied the existence of economic intimidation readily linked the economic wellbeing of workingmen to their ability to resist coercion. Writing about the narrow 1884 election during which Senator Schurz had perceived a marked increase in economic intimidation, the Republican-leaning *Daily Inter Ocean* newspaper printed a fervent denial from the owner of the North Chicago Rolling Mill Company that any of his employees had been coerced. A "more independent class of men could not be found" than those who worked at the steel mill, the paper claimed. They had voted Republican because they believed in high tariffs. Moreover, "many are well off and would never submit to dictation." By linking the political independence of the steel workers to their economic wellbeing, and specifically asserting that because they were well off they "would not submit to coercion," the paper inadvertently exposed how economic dependence paved the way for voter coercion.⁴⁶ For thousands of workers across the nation in the 1870s and 80s who were not as well off as the seemingly privileged steel workers in the North Chicago Mills, submitting to dictation and coercion at the polls was their only feasible option. As a senate committee investigating elections in Massachusetts in 1878-9 explained, employers corrupted elections by "pressing upon the necessities of workmen."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ "How Ohio Was Carried: Prostituting the Pension Bureau to Party Use," *New York Times*, October 20, 1884, 1.

⁴⁶ "Steel-Workers," Letter to the editor from Bay View, Wis., October 22, clipped from the *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), November 2, 1888, 12.

⁴⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Senate Select Committee to Inquire into the Alleged Frauds in the Late Elections*, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1880, Report No. 497, 5. Hereafter *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*.

The Shortcomings of American Election Law

Election laws in every state in the Union failed to offer sufficient protection for voters at the polls. If workingmen had enjoyed the protections of ballot secrecy and guaranteed time off from work to vote during the 1870s and 1880s, their employers would not have been able to intimidate them so extensively and effectively. It was not that the laws on the books explicitly encouraged bosses to intimidate their employees or that states weakened voter protections in the 1870s. Some states passed new laws to strengthen anti-intimidation protections, while others changed the form of their ballots or experimented with mandatory registration. In 1870, Congress passed two Enforcement Acts. The laws sought to enforce provisions of the recently passed Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and placed the newly created Justice Department in charge of combatting election-related crimes. The Enforcement Acts were particularly targeted at preventing false registration, illegal naturalization, and repeat voting in northern cities. While revolutionary in some respects, the Enforcement Acts could only protect voters from explicit intimidation at the polls. They offered no protection from employers' practice of threatening their employees at work, watching them at the polls, and then firing them later.⁴⁸

Secrecy in voting was all but unheard of in the United States before 1888. In most cases, voters confronted a set of political agents outside the polls offering up pre-made ballots. Voters could attempt to alter the ballot they were handed by covering candidate's names with sticky fragments of paper called pasters and writing in the names of candidates they preferred. While

⁴⁸ David Quigley, *Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 74-78

pasters could conceivably offer voters the ability to defy party nominations and choose their own candidates, typically pasters with names already printed on them were distributed by political machines to betray—the term of art was "knife"—someone who had displeased them. Whether they altered their ballots or not, voters only had the space of a few feet between the ticket pushers and the ballot box, in full view of their community, to make up their mind. Some voters sought to gain secrecy by acquiring their ballots in advance and carrying them in their pockets, only pulling them out at the last second when they reached the ballot box.⁴⁹

While this "vest-pocket vote" was a popular method, it was far from secure. People standing close to the ballot box could see the ballot at the critical moment. It also required the cooperation of the voting officials, which was not always an option. In Alabama in 1880, a poll worker forced voters to carry their ballots a foot and a half away from their bodies and carefully examined their wrists to make certain they had no extra ballots up their sleeves.⁵⁰ Even worse, any attempt to pocket one's ballot or conceal it by choice signaled to employers or poll watchers that a voter had something to hide.

The way that Americans voted in the late-nineteenth century bears little resemblance to modern day elections. This example, drawn from evidence taken in a contested congressional

⁴⁹ In 1891 one newspaper report of the Spring elections in Chicago explained that as a result of bitter tensions in the campaign and threats of intimidation "The vest-pocket vote is simply enormous, comprising nearly two-thirds of the total." "Close at Chicago," *The Times* (Owosso, MI) April 10, 1891, 9. Similarly, Benjamin Harrison, in a letter to his ticket-mate Levi P. Morton the week before the 1888 election, speculated that "I think the vest-pocket vote is with us." The vest-pocket method, while individually not very effective at maintaining secrecy, introduced an element of uncertainty into elections that would multiply exponentially with the introduction of the secret ballot. Benjamin Harrison to Levi P. Morton Private letter, October 29, 1888, Levi P. Morton Papers, Box 2, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

⁵⁰ Congressional Record, House of Representatives, June 2, 1882, 4468.

election case in Oswego, New York, in 1878, is representative of how most Americans voted before the advent of the secret ballot and how employers could exploit that system to control workingmen's votes. Voting in the sixth ward in Oswego took place in the local armory, an imposing brick building with one main entrance. The ballot box was in the central room of the armory, but to get to that room voters had to pass two tables, one for each major party, where men handed out pre-printed ballots listing the names and offices of the party's chosen candidates for each office. Once a voter took a ticket from either the Republican or Democratic "ticket pushers," they had nowhere to go but straight in to the polling place itself. As it happened, the two Republican ticket pushers during the 1878 election worked for Thomson Kingsford, the owner of the local starch factory. They were "stationed there," one of the Democratic ticket pushers explained in a deposition after the election, "to watch employees of the starch factory as to how they vote." The Democratic agent had in the past tried to "change the tickets after they had got them" but if the voters worked for Mr. Kingsford he had no success "as they dare not do it because they are watched."⁵¹ The lack of secrecy at the polls, always a vector for bribery and intimidation, became a critical weakness in the voting system when employers began to take an interest in the votes of their employees.

⁵¹ *Documents—Duffy vs. Mason*, 128.



Figure 1.2: An example of a fairly typical ballot of the era for a midterm election in 1878. Note the prominent placement of the word "Regular" at the top of the ticket, emphasizing that these are the official candidates of the party. Factions often split off during this era and printed their own tickets, going by names such as "State Democracy" or "Independent Republicans."⁵²

⁵² 1878 Massachusetts Democratic Ballot, Collection of Election Ballots: 1827-1889, American Antiquarian Society, Box 2, Folder 2, Online tag: 503953b2f2_0027.tif.



Figure 1.3: This *Harper's Weekly* cartoon from 1888 depicts ticket pushers in New York City. Unsurprisingly it is a highly exaggerated and stylized image: the candidates themselves are handing out ballots from booths emblazoned with derogatory and embarrassing banners while a parade of "Independent Voters of New York" representing men of all classes confidently wave off their entreaties. Exaggerations aside, the cartoon shows in broad terms what ticket pushing outside the polls looked like. Despite *Harper's Weekly's* best efforts, Harrison, Hill, and Grant all won their elections.⁵³

⁵³ William Allen Rogers, "The Irrepressible Independent," *Harper's Weekly*, October 20, 1888, 803. <http://elections.harperweek.com/1888/cartoon-1888-large.asp?UniqueID=25&Year=1888>

The regularization of elections shaped whether, when, and how working class men voted during the Gilded Age, often creating new barriers to their free participation in elections. Since the nation's founding, states had exercised broad latitude over the timing of elections, including congressional elections. States and municipalities had been slowly gravitating towards a unified November date for decades, but a national standard remained elusive. It was not until 1872 that, as part of a routine census apportionment bill, Congress designated the first Tuesday in November as the date for all federal elections.⁵⁴ Many states then concentrated their state and local elections on the same date as the federal election to limit the disruption and cost of holding multiple elections. Congressman Benjamin Butler (R-MA) justified his support for the new standard by arguing that combining elections would be particularly beneficial for workingmen. Speaking on the House floor, Butler noted that "on every election day the poor laboring man who goes to the polls to vote loses his day's work."⁵⁵ He argued that reducing the number of elections by concentrating them on the same day would enhance workers' political engagement by freeing them from having to choose between voting and making a living.

Yet, holding elections all on one day at the beginning of winter had the potential to decrease the political freedom of the very laborers Butler claimed he wanted to protect. As labor leader Samuel Gompers noted, workingmen who found themselves out of work "as winter came"

⁵⁴ George P. Sanger, editor, "The Statutes at Large and Proclamations of the United States of America, From March 1871 To March 1873, and Treaties and Postal Conventions," (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1873), 28; Chicago moved municipal elections to the Fall in 1869. Jentz and Schneirov. *Chicago in the Age*, 131.

⁵⁵ *The Congressional Globe*, December 14, 1871, 871.

faced misery of "appalling proportions."⁵⁶ The Panic of 1873 followed close on the heels of the standardization of election dates in early November, ensuring that the threat of winter misery was close at hand when workers went to the polls. In those highly charged political times, winter work and November votes became indelibly intertwined. One of the most common charges leveled in contested election cases in the era was that a boss had promised a desperate man "a winter's job" in exchange for his vote.⁵⁷ When a Senate committee trekked to Massachusetts to investigate election shenanigans surrounding Benjamin Butler's failed gubernatorial campaigns in 1878 and 1879, the committee received dozens of claims that factory workers voted "in favor of the candidates of their employers... [as] the result of a fear of loss of work at the beginning of winter."⁵⁸ The combination of a lack of employment options and the imminent onset of winter provided employers with a powerful lever of coercion over their employees that they seemingly had little compunction in using.

An additional impediment to workers freely exercising their right to vote was the time during which polls were open. State legislatures designated when the polls opened and closed, and in the charged political circumstances of the Gilded Age they sought to manipulate those laws to gain partisan advantage. As historian Richard McCormick documented in New Jersey, whenever Republicans won control of the statehouse they enacted laws that closed the polls at

⁵⁶ Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age*, Working Class in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 88-9.

⁵⁷ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Papers in the Case of Josiah G. Abbott vs. Rufus S. Frost Contested Election*. 44th Cong., 1st Sess., 1876, Mis. Doc. No. 49, 113.

⁵⁸ *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*, 2. The *Boston Globe* denounced employers for threatening "the discharge of workingmen at the opening of the winter season because they dared to vote for General Butler in defiance of orders to vote for Talbot, and forcing their children to go hungry for bread as a punishment." "The Manchaug Bulldozers," *Boston Daily Globe*, August 18, 1879, 2.

sunset, believing the move would prevent Democratic-leaning workingmen from voting or would give bosses increased leverage over workers' votes. Whenever Democrats held the upper hand, "polls were once more open until seven o'clock" in the evening.⁵⁹

The so-called "sunset laws" diminished the turnout of workingmen wherever they were enacted.⁶⁰ They provide an interesting example of how economic, political, and environmental conditions interlocked in this era to encourage economic coercion. Limiting voting to daylight hours on a Tuesday depressed workers' turnout because precarious workers could not risk discharge to vote against the dictates of their employers. In the final irony, sunset laws were especially effective because more and more elections in this era took place in November, when the sun sets early and the onset of winter could provide employers increased leverage over their workers, discouraging them from trying to skip out to vote if they knew it might cost them their jobs.

When coerced workers sought help from the law to prosecute employers for their crimes they found little protection at either the federal or state level. A congressional committee traveled to Brooklyn, New York, in 1879, to determine what the federal government could do to remedy the injustices facing the industrial laborers. The congressmen unexpectedly found themselves explaining anti-intimidation law to the workers who came to testify. Most outspoken among the

⁵⁹ Richard Patrick McCormick, *The History of Voting in New Jersey; a Study of the Development of Election Machinery, 1664-1911* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 165.

⁶⁰ For examples of contested Congressional election cases that involved charges of impropriety regarding the closure of precincts at sunset see: *Bassett v. Bayley* (VA, 13th Congress), *Hogan v. Pile* (MO, 40th Congress), *Bradley v. Slemons* (AR, 46th Congress), and *Chesebrough v. McClellan* (NY, 54th Congress) in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Chester H. Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest of all the Contested Elections in the House of Representatives of the United States from the First to the Fifty-sixth Congress, 1789-1901*, 56th Cong., 2d Sess., 1901, Doc. No. 510.

witnesses was a cooper named Valentine Becker, who professed to speak for all the coopers of the city. When asked about the hard times facing his fellow laborers, Becker insisted that "we must prevent employers from directly or indirectly influencing us to do as they say in voting."⁶¹ Seemingly attempting to defuse the issue, one of the committee members commented "I suppose you know there is a law on all the statute-books against the intimidation of voters?" To this suggestion Becker had nothing but contempt, replying "If I had free justice, I could bring men that tried to influence me."⁶² Confronted by widespread employer intimidation, the coopers of Brooklyn seemed to have little faith in legal protection.⁶³

As incidents of economic voter intimidation grew in frequency and severity, legal experts denounced anti-intimidation laws as inadequate to prevent voter coercion. Congressman Charles H. Grosvenor (R-OH) explained in a speech in 1886 that prosecuting "individual violators of election laws" was "a most inadequate remedy" for intimidation or bribery. As he explained, trying to track down and indict intimidators after the fact posed substantial logistical challenges: "the election is over, neighbors are involved, sympathy is aroused and the ends of justice are circumvented." There was no will or ability to right the wrongs of election day weeks later.⁶⁴

⁶¹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of the General Depression in Labor and Business, etc.*, 45th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 29, 110. Hereafter *1879 House Investigation—General Depression*.

⁶² *1879 House Investigation—General Depression*, 110.

⁶³ Several states passed laws in the mid-nineteenth century that banned anyone from retaliating economically against someone because of their vote: Mississippi (1839), Iowa (1850), Nebraska Territory (1855), Illinois (1871), and Delaware (1881). Other states passed laws specifically aimed at employers threatening or coercing their employees: Ohio (1839), Connecticut (1846), Massachusetts (1852), Louisiana (1868), South Carolina (1868), North Carolina (1868). While these laws were fairly common, they were generally ineffective at stopping voter coercion. Eugene Volokh, "Private Employees' Speech and Political Activity: Statutory Protection Against Retaliation," *Texas Review of Law & Policy*, Volume 16, 295-336.

⁶⁴ Charles H. Grosvenor, "The Ballot: Abuse," *The Independent*, July 8, 1886; 38, 1962.

Making intimidating illegal but failing to successfully prosecute it merely encouraged people to challenge state power as illegitimate. As A. Leo Knott, the former State Attorney of Baltimore, Maryland, explained, voter intimidation and bribery could not be halted by anti-intimidation laws that were entirely "inadequate for their suppression." Rendering crimes at the ballot box entirely "impossible of performance" was the only way to ensure halt their spread.⁶⁵ An attorney named George E. Hill built on the same premise in an article for the *Yale Law Journal* in 1891. "Mere penalties, however severe, will hardly prevent the evil," Hill argued. The only way to arrest the tide of voter coercion, Hill explained, was to "take away the opportunity" to commit the crime at all.⁶⁶

Through its powerful standing Committee on Elections, the House of Representatives had its own ability to investigate voter intimidation and raise the profile of economic voter intimidation entirely unbound by state or federal statute. But the House's investigations of coercion suffered from the same structural problems as state-level anti-intimidation laws. Because they were necessarily reactive, taking place months and sometimes years after the election in question, the Committee on Elections could only render delayed justice. Moreover, the committee lacked the power to prosecute and imprison people who intimidated voters. Its powers were limited to controlling its membership, and so it could recommend that the House seat either the initial winner of the race or his challenger if it found sufficient evidence of wrongdoing at the polls. In cases where the evidence was unclear or one of the contestants died,

⁶⁵ A. Leo Knott, "Hon. A. Leo Knott: The Three Issues Discussed In A Very Comprehensive Manner," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), February 13, 1890, 3.

⁶⁶ George E. Hill, "Secret Ballot," *Yale Law Journal* 1, no. 1 (1891): 26-29.

the committee could also suggest that the House call for a special election. By publicly investigating the circumstances of elections and passing judgment on what methods of voter persuasion rendered a candidate ineligible for House membership, however, the committee had a powerful role in setting the boundaries of electoral legitimacy, even if it could not provide voters with direct protection on election day.

Between 1869 and 1877 the key figure in the Committee on Elections' response to economic voter intimidation was Congressman George Washington McCrary (R-IA). McCrary is most likely known by historians, if he is known at all, for crafting the compromise that ended the disputed Hayes-Tilden presidential election of 1876. He also served as a federal judge, secretary of war, and chairman of the House Committee on Elections from 1871 to 1873. During his term as chairman, McCrary was frustrated by the lack of an established set of standards to adjudicate election disputes. Most importantly, the committee could not even agree on what constituted illegal voter intimidation. After his party lost control of the House and he was deprived of the chairman's gavel, McCrary decided to solve that problem and others he had detected in the contested election process by writing *A Treatise on the American Law of Elections* in 1875.

McCrary's express purpose in writing the lengthy treatise, the first book published on election law in the United States, was to begin "diminishing somewhat the number of election contests in the future, while at the same time affording some valuable aid and assistance in their proper decision, when they do arise."⁶⁷ McCrary's treatise failed to slow the rush of contestations, but it did provide a valuable guide for congress' handling of voter intimidation.

⁶⁷ George W. McCrary, *A Treatise on the American Law of Elections*, First Edition. (Keokuk, Iowa: R.B. Ogden, Chicago: E.D. Myers., 1875), 5.

Building on contested election precedents from the antebellum era, McCrary defined intimidation as "a display of force as ought to have intimidated men of ordinary firmness."⁶⁸ His definition of intimidation provided a guide for Congress' action, and more often, inaction in defensive of the right to vote for decades. The treatise went through three more editions in the next twenty years, as new laws, court rulings, and forms of coercion emerged to challenge its precepts. McCrary's successors on the Committee on Elections struggled to apply his standard of intimidation to the rush of complex cases that were brought to the House. In particular, they did not classify as illegal acts that did not involve threats of violence, including economic voter intimidation, as illegal. After handling dozens of cases of economic voter intimidation, the Committee further muddied the water in the early 1890s by ruling that discharging an employee for political reasons could be legitimate if the employee's advocacy for a particular candidate or party in the workplace became "obnoxious" to their employers.⁶⁹ In the midst of a nationwide debate over the nature of coercion and how to combat it, Congress offered states little concrete guidance on what to do when employers threatened their employees at the polls.

The Curse of Competitive Elections

Elections during the Gilded Age were extremely, unusually, close. Legal historian Edward Foley described the 1870s and 1880s as an "era of hypercompetitive elections."⁷⁰ This "uniquely unsettling period" in American politics was marked by what another scholar described

⁶⁸ McCrary, *A Treatise*, 314.

⁶⁹ Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest*, 490.

⁷⁰ Edward Foley, *Ballot Battles: The History of Disputed Elections in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 150.

as "an intense struggle for supremacy between two mature, robust, evenly matched national parties."⁷¹ Four of the ten narrowest popular vote margins in US presidential history were concentrated in that era, including two minority victories made possible by the vagaries of the electoral college. Close elections contributed to the rise in economic voter intimidation during the Gilded Age. With margins in local, congressional, and statewide elections of just a few dozen votes, and in presidential elections of just a few thousand, employers knew that if they could force just a few of their employees to vote for their chosen candidates, they could provide the decisive votes necessary for victory. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many employers took advantage of their employees' economic precarity and lack of protection at the polls to do so.

Contemporary politicians understood that presidential races would be won and lost in just a few key states where the margins would often be in the hundreds out of tens of thousands of votes cast. Five months before voters went to the polls in 1888, Senator William E. Chandler (R-NH) wrote a private letter to a political ally pinpointing the four states that were not solidly in one column or another: New York, New Jersey, Indiana, and Connecticut. All the other states were spoken for and so Chandler naturally recommended his party focus its attention on those key competitive states.⁷² As historian Mark W. Summers explained, both parties were aware that "in close northeastern industrial states, even a modest defection would shift the balance."⁷³

⁷¹ Charles W. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age*. 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 4. Michael Holt argued that the contentious elections of 1874 and 1876 "brought Democrats and Republicans to an equilibrium that had not existed since the 1850s and would continue until the 1890s." Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence: U of Kansas, 2008), 248.

⁷² William E. Chandler to Levi P. Morton, June 30, 1888, Levi Parsons Morton Papers, Box 2, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

⁷³ Mark W. Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6.

Coercing employees in those heavily industrial states offered a compelling way to eke out a victory. In that 1888 election, Chandler was proven largely correct: Benjamin Harrison (R) won New York, a state whose voters cast over 1.3 million ballots, by 14,373 votes. He took Indiana by 2,348 out of over half a million cast. Grover Cleveland (D) won New Jersey by 7,148 out of nearly 300,000 votes and Connecticut by a margin of 336 votes out of more than 150,000 ballots cast. A reversal of the results of all four states, or just New York alone, would have delivered the electoral college to Cleveland instead of Harrison. The narrowness of election margins made coercing employees tempting to employers and potentially decisive for consequential campaigns.

Narrow election margins were a reality during the Gilded Age at every level of government, not just in presidential elections. Political historian Paul Kleppner assessed voting patterns on a regional scale and discovered that votes were eminently worth stealing in a variety of elections. Even when off-year elections were factored in, Kleppner argued that the 1870s and 1880s were best defined as an era of "partisan stalemate" during which elections at all levels were "determined by margins of a few thousand votes."⁷⁴ This was especially the case in the critical Mid-Atlantic and Upper Midwest states where Republicans boasted an average advantage of just 0.1% and 1.1%, respectively, during all elections between 1882-1892. In New England and along the Pacific coast those margins were 8.1% and 3.5% in that ten year period, respectable, but far from secure. It was in what historian Charles Calhoun termed these "doubtful states" with tightly divided electorates and high populations of wage workers "where vote buying

⁷⁴ Paul Kleppner, "From Ethnoreligious Conflict to 'Social Harmony': Coalitional and Party Transformation in the 1890s," in Lipset, Bass, Lipset, ed., *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1978), 43.

or other underhanded schemes could influence the outcome."⁷⁵ The parties did everything they could, including encouraging economic voter intimidation, to win those crucial states.⁷⁶

Moreover, the close vote margins at the congressional level were not natural. Political scientists Erik Engstrom and Samuel Kernell discovered that the tight margins in nearly half of congressional races nationwide were the product of redistricting and gerrymandering practices that were unique to the post-Civil War era. In an already very competitive political environment, legislators in the 1860s-1890s sought to wring every possible drop of political advantage out of their states by constructing what Engstrom and Kernell termed "efficient gerrymanders." These districts were designed to create seats that their party could "reliably but narrowly carry," by wasting as few votes as possible. Put simply, the ideal efficient gerrymander was one in which the dominant party won every House seat in a state by just one vote.⁷⁷ One of the main beneficiaries of the system was Speaker of the House Thomas Brackett Reed (R-ME), who admitted in 1890 that Republicans enjoyed just a "4,000 majority" statewide in Indiana, but they had gerrymandered the state to ensure they won ten out of thirteen races.⁷⁸ Efficient gerrymanders also required constant redistricting as party strength and voter populations shifted. From 1872 to 1898 House seats were being redistricted somewhere in the United States in every

⁷⁵ Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt*, 7.

⁷⁶ Kleppner, "From Ethnoreligious Conflict," 44.

⁷⁷ One measure of competitiveness: "Democrats received between 45 percent and 55 percent of the vote in 39 percent of House races." Erik J. Engstrom and Samuel Kernell, *Party Ballots, Reform, and the Transformation of America's Electoral System* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 94-106.

⁷⁸ Thomas B. Reed, "The Federal Control of Elections," *The North American Review*, Vol. 150, No. 403 (June, 1890), 671-680, 672.

year but one. Efficient gerrymandering exacerbated the tight partisan divide of the era to produce far closer elections than even the polarized electorate should have been able to support.⁷⁹

In these extremely close elections, economic voter intimidation could spell the difference between the continuation of a promising political career and its abrupt end. Take, for example, Congressman Reed's political career before he became Speaker. In 1884, 1886, 1888, and 1890 Reed won reelection in Maine's First District by an average margin of barely 2% of the vote. Yet those close calls paled in comparison to 1880, when he triumphed by just 123 votes. Though he denied the charges, Reed's opponent in 1880 accused him of benefitting from extensive economic intimidation of voters, including the coercion of municipal road workers that served as the opening anecdote of this dissertation. Congress investigated the allegation but determined that the threats that "men would lose their jobs" if they voted against Reed did not constitute an "overthrow of men's wills" that necessitated overturning the election results.⁸⁰ After all, the workingmen could have simply refused their superiors' threats and voted how they liked. 1880 was the only one of Reed's many narrow wins that involved accusations of coercion. But the conditions that encouraged and countenanced economic voter intimidation in 1880—economic precariousness, open balloting, and close elections—persisted in Maine and many other states for the rest of the decade. Reed went on to serve as a transformative Speaker of the House and

⁷⁹ Engstrom and Kernell, *Party Ballots, Reform*, 94-106. Politicians did engage in the "packing" gerrymanders that became more common in the twentieth century. Including in Alabama in the early 1880s where the House Committee on Elections determined one district had been "made for the express purpose of including in it as large a proportion as possible of the Republican voters of the State." Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest*, 364.

⁸⁰ Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest*, 373.

became a particular champion of voter protections. Without the votes of a few dozen coerced road workers, however, his career may have been stillborn.

How many Americans worked and voted had become increasingly insecure in the 1870s and 80s. Employers put those two forms of precariousness together to exhibit extensive control over both their employees and elections at all levels of government. For industrialists who relied on tariff protections, road builders who worried about municipal contracts, shipbuilders who sought to build or repair navy ships, and anyone who employed others for wages who believed that elected officials could influence their prosperity, coercing their workers to ensure a friendly governmental relationship was both doable and worth it.⁸¹

Conclusion

Historian Lionel E. Fredman, writing in 1968 about ballot reform laws in the Gilded Age, sought to assess what conditions produced a "tendency to corruption" in politics. He determined that "a large number of poor and ignorant voters, the ability of a government to provide a variety of individual favors, and lax standards among officials," were the most important variables. Those conditions, he noted, "existed in the United States in the late-nineteenth century" in unprecedented force.⁸² Fredman's conditions for corruption track closely to those factors described above as the producers of economic voter intimidation. Voters who owed their

⁸¹ In 1880 the New York *Sun* explained that the Standard Oil Company coerced its workers to vote Republican because "its interests continually demand municipal, state, and national legislation... it has made politicians appreciate its favor or displeasure by money and votes." "Bulldozing For Garfield," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 31, 1880, 1.

⁸² Lionel E. Fredman, *The Australian Ballot: The Story of an American Reform* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968), 132.

economic well-being to others had long been targets for undue influence at elections. Thousands of Americans worked for wages before the Civil War, and while some were coerced by their bosses, no one considered economic intimidation a crisis that threatened democracy. What changed in the 1870s was the scope of the problem. As wage workers made up an ever-larger percentage of American workers, the pool of potential targets for intimidation by employers grew to significant proportions. The series of recessions during those decades eroded the security of American workers and made them particularly fearful of unemployment. Even when better economic conditions returned periodically, workers were terrified that the next recession would turn them out of their jobs and make them into tramps. Not only were there more economically dependent American workers in this era, they were more economically precarious than ever before.

Election laws offered few protections for voters. Americans voted, either by voice vote or open ballot, in full view of anyone who chose to attend the polls. What changed in the 1870s was the makeup of the crowd at the polls. As historian Richard Bense documented, in the nineteenth century, party operatives often staked out the polls to bribe or intimidate those they believed were not going to cast ballots for their party. In the 1870s and 80s, however, those party operatives were joined by unprecedented numbers of factory owners, foremen, and crew bosses. When economically precarious wage-workers came to the polls—often in early-November just as winter began to threaten—they had to carry their ballots through a gauntlet of men who had the power and incentive to destroy their livelihoods and endanger their families. The

ineffectiveness of anti-intimidation laws compounded the problem. Coercive employers had little to fear from the law, while employees had much to fear from their employers.

What brought employers to the polls to watch their employees? In part it was the close election margins of the Gilded Age, but federal and state governments also had far more to offer than ever before. Employers who wanted government contracts, tariff protections, or regulators to leave them alone, knew that being able to command swing votes in a politician's district could secure them a friendly hearing. In the years before the emergence of organized business lobbying, controlling employee's votes was a potent way to influence government policy. For all these reasons, American workers often walked from their workplaces to their polling places in fear. Waiting for them where they voted and back at their jobs were men who had everything to gain from intimidating them for their vote and were unconcerned about legal repercussions.

Chapter Two: "Vote For Your Bread and Butter:" The Methods of Coercion

A few days before the 1886 congressional election, Jerry O'Brien, a day laborer at the Union Iron Works Shipyard in San Francisco, looked up from his workbench to see an unexpectedly famous face coming through the door. State Assemblyman Charles Felton walked as if he owned the place, an impression reinforced in the minds of the laborers who saw him by the sudden appearance of the yard foreman at Felton's side. The foreman, a man named Arnold, had hired O'Brien and most of the other laborers in the yard. As Felton and Arnold toured the foundry floor, O'Brien heard Arnold introduce the assemblyman to his employees and remind them that Felton was running for Congress and "it was in the interest of the laboring man" to vote for him because his election "means work for some of the men." In the contested election case that followed, O'Brien testified that he and the other laborers "understood that they were to vote for Mr. Felton," or they would be discharged "in a very bad condition." They were all, O'Brien said, "dependent for their support of themselves and their families upon the wages" paid out each week by the foreman who strode arm in arm through the foundry with the Republican candidate for Congress.¹ How could they refuse him?

Many of the tactics employers used to control the votes of their employees had been in use for decades.² Between 1873 and 1896, however, workers, bosses, and politicians treated economic voter intimidation as a dangerous new phenomenon. This form of intimidation came to

¹ Sullivan v. Felton Contested Election Case, House of Representatives Committee on Elections, 50th Congress, Record Group HR50A-F.9.9, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

² Outbursts of intimidation of workingmen by their bosses during times of economic panic were relatively common. Political discharges of workmen by "employers and capitalists" during the tumult produced by President Andrew Jackson's Bank War and the resultant depression was a particularly well known example. See Senate Resolution on the death of William D. Kelley, on May 20, 1890, 51st Congress, 1st Session, *Congressional Record-Senate* 4967.

feel like a crisis in these decades because of its seeming omnipresence and its apparent effectiveness. When it happened only occasionally, as seems to have been the case before the Panic of 1873, intimidation of workers had generally been dismissed as a minor problem compared to epidemic bribery, violence, and fraud. Yet in the midst of the economic depression of the 1870s and 1880s employer coercion of employees both became far more common and tapped into a broader national debate over labor and dependence.³ In this context, the sense among politicians, bosses, and workers that economic intimidation was afflicting every industry and every working-class voter turned what had been a minor concern into national crisis. Some people undoubtedly made false accusations, and partisan newspapers spun confused incidents into nefarious coercion. Yet, the accumulation of evidence from contested congressional election testimony, special congressional investigations, newspaper reports and editorials, and corporate records argues for the existence of a real and widespread economic voter intimidation problem in the Gilded Age.

Of particular use in this study is the collected evidence of contested congressional election cases. Compared to partisan newspapers and personal accounts, contested election cases offer substantially more reliable descriptions of the conduct of elections in the late-nineteenth century. While partisanship and the potential for witness tampering remained serious concerns,

³ The digest of Congressional contested election cases covering 1865-1871 contains just four references to economic voter intimidation. Only one incident took place in the North. See U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, D.W. Bartlett, *Digest of Election Cases. Cases of contested elections in the House of Representatives, from 1865 to 1871*, 41st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1870, Misc. Doc. 152. By comparison the digest covering the years from 1876-1880 contains dozens of examples of bosses coercing desperate employees across the country. See U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, J.H. Ellsworth, *Digest of Election Cases. Cases of contested elections in the House of Representatives, Forty-Fifth and Forty-Sixth Congresses, from 1876 to 1880*, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., 1883, Misc. Doc. 57.

contested election case investigations were conducted under a relatively standardized set of procedures that political scientists Didi Kuo and Jan Teorell likened to the "outer characteristics of a judicial trial." Contestants could call rebuttal witnesses and frequently relied on attorneys to conduct depositions and prepare their cases for submission to the House Committee on Elections. The committee itself had decades earlier established high standards of evidence, though it often had little trouble setting aside those standards for momentary partisan advantage.⁴

Notably, evidence of economic voter intimidation is not limited to particularly contentious elections or especially totalizing workplaces. High stakes elections that seemingly pitted the working classes against their employers, like the Massachusetts gubernatorial elections in 1878 and 1879, or the presidential elections of 1888 and 1896, produced many accusations of economic voter intimidation. Yet, extensive and well documented claims cropped up during elections that had no controversial economic issues at stake. Similarly, while company towns were the site of a disproportionate number of economic voter intimidation claims and so receive particular attention in this chapter, workers were coerced by their bosses in small factories, farms, navy yards, street railroad lines, and dozens of other workplaces of varying size and with different levels of control over worker freedom.

⁴ Didi Kuo and Jan Teorell, "Illicit Tactics as Substitutes: Election Fraud, Ballot Reform, and Contested Congressional Elections in the United States, 1860-1930," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 5 (April 2017): 665–96, 672.

A Pervasive Problem

The widespread nature of the problem of economic voter intimidation is reflected in its appearance in wildly unrelated fields of human endeavor. An 1881 article in the Pennsylvania newspaper the *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer* discussing nothing more weighty than the daily goings on of the wealthy men at Newport, Rhode Island, offers a perfect example of how deeply coercion pervaded the popular consciousness. In between descriptions of polo matches and clam bakes, the article contrasted the morality and class of the respected gentleman Mr. Bennett with his archrival Mr. Goddard by levying a charge of economic intimidation. The anonymous author of the article explained that he had read in Vermont newspapers that Goddard had "intimidated his employees into electing him to the Vermont Legislature."⁵ The gossipy report of Goddard's alleged economic intimidation demonstrates just how widespread economic voter intimidation was during the Gilded Age. The article did not include an explanation of how such intimidation operated or any detailed argument for why it should be considered illegitimate, suggesting that readers were familiar with such accusations and would know to judge Mr. Goddard harshly for his behavior.

In 1878, the popular children's magazine *The Youth's Companion* explained that coercion of voters was a problem important enough that its readers should understand its mechanics, even though they were not yet eligible to vote. The article described the suspicious "sudden activity" in navy yards before important elections, when all the new workingmen were "expected to vote for the party to which they owed their wages." It also explained the corruption that pervaded in

⁵ "Mr. Bennett at Newport," *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer* (Lancaster PA), August, 17, 1881, 1.

municipal road working departments, whose employees "were watched when they went to the polls" and would be discharged if they crossed their bosses. *The Youth's Companion* carefully explained to its young readers that the uncertainty contained in state and federal anti-bribery statutes meant that tying jobs to votes "is really, though not legally, bribery of the voter." Far worse in *The Youth's Companion's* eyes, if a worker cast his ballot for the party his employer supported "reluctantly," then that interaction should be treated as "coercion or intimidation." The article introduced children across the country to the existence and methods of economic voter intimidation as an unfortunate but undeniable reality of American politics in the 1870s.⁶

Congressional investigations into topics unrelated to elections in this era frequently strayed into discussions of economic voter intimidation. A House of Representatives investigation into the relations between labor and capital in 1883 provides such an example. Peter J. McGuire, the New York City-based president of the United Order of Carpenters and Joiners and later cofounder of the American Federation of Labor, described to the congressional committee the "systemic intimidation of employees" he had seen in the Pacific railroad yards as well as in "the cotton manufacturing districts, the mill districts, the iron districts, and the mining districts" across the nation.⁷ There was, he said, "a general system of intimidation in all the great corporations of the country; a system of political, social, and industrial intimidation."⁸ The congressmen conducting the inquiry were not at all shocked to be confronted with such serious

⁶ "The 'Floating Vote,'" *The Youth's Companion* (Boston, MA), January 17, 1878; 51, 3; 20.

⁷ For more on McGuire see Edward T. O'Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 111 and David Quigley, *Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 106.

⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee, Volume 1—Testimony*, 48th Cong., 1885, 341. Hereafter *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital*.

accusations on a topic that was not strictly within their purview, though they did question McGuire on his sources of information.

The previous chapter explained the economic, legal, and political conditions that made possible the appearance of economic voter intimidation in society gossip, children's magazines, and virtually everywhere congress looked. But how did it work in practice? What were the methods and mechanisms that bosses used in their efforts to suborn the votes of their employees, where were they most and least effective, and why was it such a difficult form of electoral shenanigan to stop? Bosses relied on two methods to unduly influence the votes of their employees between 1873 and 1892. Employers either threatened to discharge their employees for voting the wrong way, or they sought to physically control or observe employees as they went to the polls and cast their ballots. Often, employers did both. These methods remained largely constant across the time period and throughout the nation, differing based on local and state laws and the extent of employees' economic dependence. Though largely common across all industries and regions, particular forms of discharge threats and polling place control did emerge in certain forms of workplace. The most interesting of these special contexts—navy yards and company towns—receive close attention at the end of this chapter.

The Discharge Threat

The core of economic voter intimidation was the threat of discharge from employment. The form and seriousness of the threat varied, but its mechanics remained relatively consistent. Economically precarious and with little legal protection, employees had few options when their

employers told them that their job was tied to their vote. Depending on the employer, the industry, and the ethnicity of the employee such threats were made subtly or forcefully. The most forceful threats are not difficult to discern in the historical record. Nor were they confusing to contemporary observers. For instance, when a labor leader testified to a congressional committee that laborers in Chicago could not exercise their ballots freely, Congressman Henry Dickey of Ohio incredulously asked if he really meant that the "corporations who employ them threaten to discharge them if they do not vote in a particular manner?" When the witness answered in the affirmative, Dickey denounced it as a particularly despicable form of "bulldozing."⁹ In 1888 the *New York Times* denounced "all kinds of covert threats" including firings, mill and factory closings, and the replacement of workers with immigrants. The Republican bosses of New York, the *Times* claimed, used these threats "to frighten the laboring men into giving up their independent right of suffrage." The *Times* noted that such methods were "clearly 'intimidation' within the meaning of the law," and should be treated just as seriously as election day violence by state and federal officials.¹⁰ More subtle discharge threats, however, often fell into a legal gray area, subject to debate over whether they were intimidation or just conversation.

The road work crews in Portland, Maine, a city that seems to have been a hotbed of economic voter intimidation in 1880, experienced a particularly overt form of discharge threat from their foremen. The workers were terrified of losing their jobs just as the awful New England winter arrived, but at least one man resisted threats from his boss and chose to go home

⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives. *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of General Depression in Labor and Business; and as to Chinese Immigration*. 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 5, 82. Hereafter *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*.

¹⁰ "Intimidation By Protected Manufacturers," *New York Times*, November 2, 1888, 4.

instead of voting for a Republican ticket he did not support. The rest of the road workers dutifully took the ballots handed to them by their bosses and trudged to the polls. As they left the job site, their overseer, a man named Staples, called after them; "Mind how you vote, boys; vote for your bread and butter. If you cut my throat now I'll cut yours hereafter. I am on your track and will camp on it." With Staples' threat ringing in their ears, a bricklayer whispered to the Democratic poll workers they passed that "this is not the ballot I would vote could I help it." But what could he and his coworkers do? One of the foremen came with them to the polls. He stood just five feet away as they slipped their open ballots into the box, each of them knowing, as one laborer later testified in the election contestation, that the foreman felt it was "no use giving me work if I went against his party."¹¹

Discharge threats could be effective on a far larger scale than a dozen or so outdoor laborers in Maine. John McAulif, a socialist and engineer, told a congressional investigating committee that thousands of workers in Chicago were "under threat of being discharged unless they vote as their employers dictate." He alleged that companies as diverse as the street railways, the gas company, the stock-yards, packing houses, and building contractors, bulldozed their workers regularly. And, since "discharge from employment means want of bread and consequent misery to the workingmen" in a difficult labor market, these efforts were generally effective. McAulif calculated that "out of fifty-five or sixty thousand voters in Chicago there are from fifteen to twenty thousand of them who are bulldozed."¹² It is impossible to know whether

¹¹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Testimony in the Contested Election Case of Samuel J. Anderson vs. Thomas B. Reed*, 47th Cong., 1st Sess., 1881, Mis. Doc. No. 13, 102-151.

¹² *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 162.

McAulif's calculations were correct, but no one sought to refute the central premise of his testimony: discharge threats existed on a large scale and in a variety of industries.

Threatening hundreds or thousands of workers required far more subtlety than the road work foremen in Maine exercised in their little fiefdom. The story related by Jerry O'Brien from the Union Iron Works Shipyard in San Francisco that begins this chapter is a good example of how an ostensibly gentle suggestion from a man in a position of power could shape the votes of hundreds of workers. The foreman had said that voting for Felton would mean jobs for some of the men for years. His workers had no reason to disbelieve him. Whether such suggestions counted as intimidation was the subject of endless debate and recrimination in the contested election case brought by the losing candidate in that election. The superintendent of the shipyard, Irving M. Scott, unequivocally denied that he had illicitly tilted the scales on Felton's behalf. When pressed, Scott declared that in his shipyard, "there is no such thing as intimidation so far as men's votes were concerned." However, he did not deny inviting Felton to visit the foundry floor, offering in his own defense only that he had extended the invitation to other candidates as well. Far more damningly, while Scott maintained that his foreman would never have "used any intimidation because it is against our rules," he confirmed that the foreman probably had said that Felton would bring work to the shipyard, because "all good congressmen would."¹³ No one

¹³ "Irving M. Scott- Brief Sketch of the Eventful Career of a Successful Man," *San Francisco Alta Californian*, July 20, 1888, 1. In San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park Research Center, Bethlehem Steel Corporation, Shipbuilding Division, San Francisco, records, HDC345, Series 6, Subseries 3, Box 146, File 10, Folder 8, Union Iron Works Collection.

had explicitly stated that workers would be fired if they voted the wrong way, but men like Jerry O'Brien and his dozens of coworkers had clearly believed it to be the case.¹⁴

Discharge threats in factories could also be concealed as part of so called "campaigns of education," particularly when campaign issues aligned with the concerns of large employers. Educational campaigns-efforts to sway voters by convincing them that one side or another offered greater economic benefits or protection to them individually-gradually replaced the marches and rallies common to popular politics in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁵ The democratic rituals of the popular style had always seemed to exude a stench of graft to the primarily upper-middle class reformers who advocated for "pocketbook" focused educational campaigns that sought to convince voters to support candidates based on careful arguments about economic issues like the omnipresent tariff. George Hoadly, the former Democratic governor of Ohio, described a campaign of education in his 1889 appeal for ballot reform as the only "legitimate method of political warfare." But in endorsing more issue-based campaigning he overlooked how employers could conceal coercive demands within otherwise "honorable and legitimate" campaign messages.¹⁶

¹⁴ Though there is no conclusive evidence that the bosses at the Union Iron Works Shipyard acted with corrupt intent, what records do exist are highly suggestive. Barely three weeks after Felton won the election, the shipyard, which had been in dire financial straits with the decline of its mining machinery contracts in the grinding economic downturn, won a competitive bid to build a new steel cruiser for the navy. The *U.S.S Charleston* took around two years to build, just as the foreman had promised his men. When he was questioned about the difficult negotiation during which, as a friendly newspaperman noted, "everything was arrayed against him," Scott reluctantly admitted that "Felton did, to a certain extent, assist us." "Irving M. Scott Speaks," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 5, 1887, 7.

¹⁵ Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford: 1986), 69-106.

¹⁶ George Hoadly, "Methods of Ballot Reform," *Forum* (New York, NY), August 1889, 623.

Republican bosses used seemingly educational messages concerning the omnipresent tariff issue of the 1880s to launder coercive messages targeted at their employees. For example, laborers arrived for work in the Sanford Mills in Maine one morning just before the 1880 federal election to find their workplace plastered in notices announcing, as one worker reported, that "if the Democrats came in power it would necessitate the shutting down of their mills."¹⁷ Another witness testified that one of his coworkers at Sanford Mills switched his vote to the GOP in fear that he would "probably lose [his] job... if he voted the democratic ticket." Others, having seen the placards in the mill, worried more generally that "if the Democrats succeeded in electing the next House and President that the tariff would be taken off, and the mills be forced to shut down."¹⁸ The witness himself seemed unsure whether what he was recounting constituted illegal voter tampering, but it was certainly not the reasoned appeal to votes that reformers believed an educational campaign to be. He concluded that the workers had been "probably more or less" intimidated by the tariff messages from their bosses.¹⁹ Similar incidents of tariff-related propaganda in workplaces that workers interpreted as veiled threats to their livelihoods occurred throughout the decade of the 1880s in New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York.²⁰

¹⁷ *Testimony—Anderson vs. Reed*, 370.

¹⁸ *Testimony—Anderson vs. Reed*, 396.

¹⁹ *Testimony—Anderson vs. Reed*, 396.

²⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee, Volume 1—Testimony*, 48th Cong., 341; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Report in the Contested Election Case of Frank H. Hurd v. Jacob Romeis*, 49th Cong., 1st Sess., 1886, Report No. 1449, 11-13; "Bulldozing Their Employees," *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer* (Lancaster PA), October 20, 1880, 2; "Intimidating Workmen," *New York Times*, November 4, 1884, 5; "Intimidation By Protected Manufacturers," *New York Times*, November 2, 1888, 4.

While most discharge threats originated with employers who had a personal or economic stake in an election, coercive pressure could also be transmitted from parties or candidates to employers and then on to employees. The case of Robert F. Jennings, a white tobacco warehouse worker in Danville, Virginia, in 1882 provides a telling example. Jennings was a strong supporter of the biracial Readjuster Party and had shrugged off Democratic efforts to change his political allegiance until one day he arrived at the warehouse to find that if he wanted to keep his job he would need to change his vote. His bosses had seemingly sought to steer clear of politics until representatives of the local Democratic Party told them in no uncertain terms that if they did not discharge Jennings "their discounts should be cut off at the bank and that tobacco would not be sent to their warehouse." The "coercion and ostracism" levied against Jennings' employers and through them on him proved too much for him to bear and he was soon seen marching in a Democratic rally by Readjuster-leaning voters.²¹

While in the North, discharge threats mostly emanated from Republican factory owners concerned about tariff rates, in the South they formed part of what the Chicago *Inter Ocean* described in 1876 as the "intricate machinery of intimidation, restraint, and violence" that Democrats inflicted on African American voters. As early as 1867 evidence emerged from newspapers and congressional investigations that employers were threatening the "means of subsistence" of African Americans if they tried to vote Republican.²² As one Georgia voter testified in a contested election case in 1892, it had become "the custom" across the South for

²¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report from the Committee of the Committee on Privileges and Elections on the Alleged Massacre of Colored Men at Danville*, 48th Cong., 1st Sess., 1884, Report No. 579, 432.

²² "A System of Coercion," *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), August 22, 1876, 4.

"those working in large industrial institutions" to vote the way their employers directed them for fear of discharge.²³

During critical elections, Democrats levied economic threats against anyone who dared to vote Republican in southern states. A Senate Special Committee investigating the Mississippi elections of 1875 and 1876 exposed the "electioneering" methods employed by the Democrats in that state. The very first witness before the committee was Edward Howard, a Post Office Special Agent. Howard testified that "depriving a man of his means of employment" if he voted Republican was "just the ordinary pressure" that his Democratic neighbors brought to bear during each election.²⁴ In Howard's opinion, this social and economic ostracism was "the most powerful means... the worst form... of intimidation" in the South. For those whose economic survival depended on working with or for other men, this kind of ostracism could be life threatening.²⁵ Other witnesses gave the committee the names of African American men who had been fired from jobs at a railroad and a merchant's shop and another who was denied credit at a store for voting Republican.²⁶ A Republican newspaper editor from Natchez described in detail how local merchants had threatened the draymen of the city that they would no longer hire them for deliveries if they voted Republican.²⁷ Another witness explained to the committee that even if

²³ Watson v. Black, Contested Election Case Files, House of Representatives Committee on Elections, 50th Congress, Record Group HR53A-F.9.10, National Archives Building, Washington, DC (6257).

²⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Testimony as to the Denial of Elective Franchise in Mississippi at the Elections of 1875 and 1876*, 44th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1877, Mis. Doc. No. 45, 9. Hereafter *1877 Senate Investigation—Mississippi*. For more coverage of the Mississippi investigation and its findings on economic intimidation see "Proceedings Before The Investigating Committee," *New York Times*, January 29, 1875, 5.

²⁵ *1877 Senate Investigation—Mississippi*, 22.

²⁶ *1877 Senate Investigation—Mississippi*, 99, 104.

²⁷ *1877 Senate Investigation—Mississippi*, 137.

employers did not actually follow through on all their threats after the election, the terror that the "common report" of politicized discharges produced among African American voters was very real.²⁸

Discharge threats were less common outside industrial workspaces but they still cropped up in congressional investigations and newspaper reports. In Virginia in 1888, the forty or fifty employees of the Stewart Land and Cattle Company "had been given to understand that they must vote the Democratic ticket or lose their places." However, as in industrial sites like the Union Iron Works, the subtle nature of the discharge threat made it difficult for the Virginia ranch hands to prove their case. The Republican contestant who had lost the election produced witnesses who testified that it was "generally understood in the community" that giving up their vote to the whims of their bosses was "one of the conditions of employment" that all ranch hands had been forced to accept.²⁹ The ranch hands in Virginia were certainly not unique among rural laborers. A reporter writing about Michigan elections for the *Nation* in 1889 remarked upon just how widespread economic voter intimidation was in farming communities. He noted seemingly

²⁸ *1877 Senate Investigation—Mississippi*, 289.

Jackson, Mississippi, provides an example that this kind of coercion could affect even relatively privileged white voters in the South. One of the last white Republicans holding elected office in the South was the Mayor of Jackson, John McGill. In 1888 Democrats waged a violent campaign against African American voters, driving them from the polls and Mayor McGill from office in what papers euphemistically referred to in later years as the "upheaval." While violence was at the heart of the campaign, economic intimidation also played a role. The generally Democratic *Clarion* newspaper had long been friendly to McGill, perhaps in thanks for the mayor channeling city printing contracts to the paper. But in the heat of the "upheaval," the paper's owner was unwilling to countenance divided loyalties. The paper's editor, Oliver Clifton, voted for McGill in 1888, a choice that he did not believe was controversial. The *Clarion's* owner felt differently. He discharged Clifton when he returned from the polls on election day for the crime of having "voted for McGill." "Testimony on Municipal Election at Jackson, Mississippi," Senate, 50th Congress, 1st Session, Mis. Doc. No. 166, Ordered to be Printed July 28, 1888, 366 and "The Hon. John M'Gill," *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS), March 26, 1896, 4.

²⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Report in the Contested Election Case of Henry Bowen v. John A. Buchanan*, 51st Cong., 1st Sess., 1890, Report No. 1214, 3.

without concern or surprise that "the farmer's 'help' of to-day is a very different sort of personage from the farmer's 'hired man' of ante-bellum days." In the new economy of the 1880s, he wrote, a prosperous farmer expected that his "'help' will go with him to the polls and vote as he directs."³⁰ If they refused, the farmer would presumably find other help during the harvest.

Employers were so convinced of the effectiveness of discharge threats that they often felt comfortable openly bragging about their successes. A Portland, Maine, construction boss named Whitmore proudly told a business acquaintance he ran into on the street after the 1880 congressional election that he had driven dozens of men to vote for the Republican candidate by asking them "where they got their bread and butter" and threatening to look elsewhere for labor if they took a Democratic ticket.³¹ Recounted as part of a contested congressional election case, the most noteworthy element of the otherwise standard discharge threat is the remarkably casual nature of Whitmore's confession. Particularly as the man Whitmore confessed to, John E. Dow, was a prominent insurance broker well known to be a close personal friend and political supporter of the Democratic candidate!

Observation and Control on Election Day

A discharge threat could be issued days or weeks before election day and repeated as often as seemed necessary. Because they did not have to be issued at the polls, discharge threats were especially difficult to combat. But a threat, even an existential threat delivered multiple times, is only effective when it is enforced. To back up their threats, employers developed a

³⁰ Summers, *Party Games*, 101.

³¹ *Testimony—Anderson vs. Reed*, 65.

repertoire of election-day tactics to impress upon their employees just how extensively they controlled their lives. By pairing subtle or overt discharge threats in advance of an election with direct control or observation of employees on election day, bosses enjoyed expansive control over their employees' votes. Many election day tactics often seemed friendly or unimportant when shorn of context, providing employers with legal cover during the frequent congressional and journalistic investigations that cropped up in the 1870s and 80s. Workers subject to such methods, however, were well aware of their coercive intent.

Perhaps the most common element in testimony of economic intimidation in any large workplace was the offer by a boss or foreman to their employees of a free ride to vote. In workplaces where employers sought to leverage their economic power for political purposes, the physical control inherent in a company-provided wagon ride to the polls offered a powerful vector for coercion. During a contested election case in Georgia, observers accused employers of intimidating employees who they hauled to the polls in wagonloads.³² Bosses at the Kingsford starch factory in Oswego, New York, allegedly escorted their employees "to the polls on election day and watch[ed] them there until they vote."³³ By offering them a ride down to the polls, the Kingsford bosses were able to control their movement and make sure they got "down to the polls first" to position themselves next to the polls and see that their men took the right tickets. The "starch factory system" gave employers the ability to observe and mark down the names of any

³² *Watson v. Black Contested Election Case*, House of Representatives Committee on Elections, HR 53A-F9.10, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.

³³ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Sebastian Duffy v. Joseph Mason Papers and Documents for the Twenty-Fourth Congressional District of New York*, 46th Cong., 1st Sess., 1879, Misc. Doc. 23, 204.

worker who cast the "wrong" ballot.³⁴ Despite the threat inherent in the presence of the starch factory bosses at the polls as their employees came to take their tickets, both the defeated candidate and the House Committee on Elections defined it as "a system of bribery," not intimidation.³⁵ Modern scholarship, too, has erred in classifying all offers to "send a carriage to bring the voter to the polls" as a benign element of parties' get out the vote campaigns.³⁶ While in many cases a ride to the polls was friendly, it became a form of intimidation when employers used those rides to control their employees' movements and make observing their votes easier.³⁷

With a little coordination, employers could enjoy near total control of the circumstances in which their employees voted. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, employees who worked on the railroad and at the state's largest woolen mill and largest agricultural implements factory testified in 1880 that on election days their bosses carried out a "system of coercion and intimidation." Much as in Oswego, the foreman or employer marched their men to the polls, where "ballots were there placed in their hands, folded, and voted by the employees without being opened." In the case of the North Star Woolen Mills, laborers were escorted to the polls and watched over by the son of the mill owner, whose presence impressed upon them that they would "lose their means of subsistence" if they voted the wrong way. The bosses knew the political leanings of their employees intimately. Bosses simply kept those workers they suspected of holding strong

³⁴ *Documents—Duffy vs. Mason*, 218.

³⁵ Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest*, 346.

³⁶ Kornbluh, *Why America Stopped Voting*, 51.

³⁷ Parties often used campaign funds to hire wagons to take voters to the polls. In 1896 Samuel F. Barr, a former Republican congressman from Pennsylvania, then living in Maine, bragged in a letter to William McKinley that he had raised funds to transport voters to the polls "on the condition that they vote for you." Samuel F. Barr to William McKinley, William McKinley Papers: Series 1, General Correspondence and Related Items-1902; Sept. 6-1897, Feb. 22. 1847. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Image 532. September 13, 1896, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss322680001/>.

opposing views or who might cause a scene at the polls on the job all day and did not permit them to take time off to vote. The presence of "large numbers of employers of labor" at the polls in Minneapolis seems to have attracted the attention of party poll watchers and activists. One poll watcher tried to talk to the line of laborers to see how they were voting but was cut off by one of the bosses who declared that "he had brought the men there himself, and that most of the workmen voted as their employers wanted them to." This was undoubtedly true. Workers "whose means of life depended upon the good-will of those who employed them" had few options when their bosses stood over them at the polls.³⁸

³⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Report in the Case of Ignatius Donnelly vs. William D. Washburn Contested Election*, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1880, Report No. 1791, 16-23. For more on the Washburn case see: "Washburn's Nemesis," *The Saint Paul Globe* (St. Paul, MN), March 19, 1880, 2.



Figure 2.1: One vignette from *Harper's Weekly's* 1888 "Scenes and Incidents of Election Day in New York." The magazine published a similar illustration after each presidential election. In this case the drawing shows a Republican ticket pusher handing a ballot to a well-dressed man of color while a heavyset and somewhat ruffled white man looks on. The absolute lack of privacy depicted in this scene is entirely typical of the process of selecting a ballot before the introduction of the secret ballot.³⁹

³⁹ W.A. Rogers, "Scenes and Incidents of Election Day in New York," *Harper's Weekly*, November 13, 1880, 728.



Figure 2.2: This balloting scene from the 1880 version of the *Harper's Weekly* election day illustration depicts a Chinese man in line to cast a ballot. Though the illustrator was interested in the ethnic identity of the voter, this depiction of the polling place is typical of the lack of privacy for voters while casting a ballot. Standing just to the left of the polling window is a well dressed man in a top hat seemingly watching each ballot as it goes in the box.⁴⁰

If they were careful, control of when and how their workers went to the polls gave employers the ability to prevent opponents or election observers from asking awkward questions of their employees or otherwise interfering with their coercive techniques. One man running for

⁴⁰ S.G. McCutcheon, "Scenes and Incidents of Election Day in New York," *Harper's Weekly*, November 13, 1880.

municipal office in San Mateo, California, believed that the powerful Spring Valley Water Company was intimidating its employees. He dispatched a man to the polls "to go there and see that everything was conducted fairly and to look after my interests." The attempt to discover voter intimidation failed, however, when the poll watcher arrived at nine in the morning to find that the company's workers had, at the behest of their foremen, "all voted before he got there!"⁴¹

The constraint of having election day on a work day had the potential to shape workingmen's voting even if their bosses did not use any nefarious means. The pro-Republican *New-York Tribune* noted in an election day editorial in 1894 that "a greater number of employers than usual feel the necessity this year of keeping open their places of business on Election Day owing to the hard times." In good times, kind bosses typically closed up shop for all or part of the day to give their workers time to go to the polls. Now the *Tribune's* editors were concerned that market pressures could compel employers to deny workers time to vote. The editorial certainly did not ascribe nefarious motives to employers, noting they acted "for the same reason thousands of workingmen do not feel that they can this year afford to lose the whole or a part of a day's wages." While they blamed the "hard times" for the situation, the editors also acknowledged the power dynamics at work. While many workers may have decided that a day's wages were more important than voting that year, their employers retained the final decision-making power. The *Tribune* editors begged each boss to "make it possible for all his employees to vote without the sacrifice of a part of their wages," but they also knew that bosses held the final say over whether the works would close on election day.⁴²

⁴¹ Sullivan v. Felton, HR50A-F.9.9.

⁴² "Editorial Article 1— No Title," *New-York Tribune*, November 6, 1894, 6.

Control of employees on election day could even outweigh the efforts of white supremacists to prevent African Americans from voting in the post-Reconstruction South. In Petersburg, Virginia, in 1896, the city police stretched a rope around the polls. A Republican ward heeler testified in a contested congressional election case that white men "voted as they came up" to the polls, while African American men were "kept back and prevented from voting in preference to the whites, presumably in hope that they would give up and leave." The exception to this system emerged when the eight African American workers from the local city asylum were marched by their boss to the polls. These voters were ushered around the rope and allowed to enter the polls immediately. Within ten minutes they had all voted Democratic and begun their walk back to the asylum. When asked how these eight men were able to circumvent the racial politics of Virginia so adroitly, the witness explained that the asylum workers had not truly been able to make an independent political choice: "they have to vote, generally, the Democratic ticket to keep their positions."⁴³ The example of the asylum workers demonstrates how one form of coercion could be layered atop another. The presence of their boss at the polls and his implied discharge threat, coupled with the barriers that all African Americans faced attempting to vote, meant that the asylum workers must have felt that they had no option but to cast the chosen ballot of their boss. It may not have been the ballot of their choice, but they were well aware that by opposing their boss' wishes they would lose their jobs and assuredly be banished beyond the rope around the polls that African Americans were rarely allowed to cross.

⁴³ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Report in the Contested Election Case of R.T. Thorp v. Sydney P. Epes*, 55th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1898, Report No. 428, 10-11.

Mechanisms of control and coercion could be effective no matter the scale. Jeremiah O. Brion, a carriage driver, woke up on election Tuesday in Portland, Maine, with the intent of casting his ballot for Republican incumbent Thomas Brackett Reed. Brion's employer had other plans. That morning Brion arrived at his boss' home, readied the carriage, and was immediately dispatched on a thirty-mile round trip to the town of Yarmouth. Afraid "to disobey lest he be discharged," Brion made the trip as quickly as he could, but failed to make it back to his precinct in time to cast his ballot.⁴⁴ Employers' control of their employees' work hours, even in a relatively unstructured job like carriage driving, gave them the ability to prevent their employees from voting at all.

The visibility of votes in an open ballot system was vividly demonstrated in a probably apocryphal story that made the rounds in Democratic newspapers in the late 1870s. The story went that a wealthy employer in Roxbury, Massachusetts, issued a discharge threat to one of his employees on the morning of election day. Undeterred, the workingman responded in kind, telling his boss "if you don't vote for my candidate I will never work for you a day longer." The two men watched each other vote. The workingman casting a Democratic ticket, his employer a Republican ticket. Yet the employer shrank before the enormity of his threat and claimed "I did not mean what I said." He would not fire his man just for casting a different ballot. The employee, however, stood by his word, packed his things and left, declaring he would "never work for a man who don't vote the Democratic ticket." Newspapers gleefully reprinted the story as the time a boldly "independent" employee tried to "bull-doze his employer." The story perhaps

⁴⁴ *Testimony—Anderson vs. Reed*, 6.

served as wish fulfillment for workingmen who had experienced intimidation in the workplace and wanted to fight back, but kept quiet in fear of the consequences. As fanciful as the story may have been, its depiction of the physical realities of the polling place were spot on. Anyone could see what ballot a voter cast, and in an era when discharge meant a plunge into penury, few workingmen were willing to take defy their coercive bosses and vote as they believed.⁴⁵

Workers often knew to expect boss's attempts to coerce them. As a factory worker in upstate New York testified during an 1878 contested congressional election case, it was "common talk upon the public streets" that factory bosses intimidated their employees at the polls.⁴⁶ In Scranton, Pennsylvania, the foreman of a local coal mine made certain that everyone heard him when he yelled out "we will have to see to that fellow" each time he spotted a miner voting the wrong ticket from his post across the street from the polls.⁴⁷ The lack of secrecy was no accident. By 1890, employers could invoke a wide-ranging repertoire of methods of economic intimidation, comfortable in the knowledge that their workers were well aware of the existence and effectiveness of each method. Even after the introduction of the secret ballot and other reforms made intimidation at the polls far more difficult, American workers' knowledge of what employers had done to their employees was in and of itself a powerful coercive tool. Employees who were aware that colleagues in similar circumstances had lost their jobs on account of their votes were less likely to oppose even subtle political suggestions from their bosses.

⁴⁵ "Bull-doing His Employer," *New York Times*, May 3, 1879, 2.

⁴⁶ *Documents—Duffy vs. Mason*, 217.

⁴⁷ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of the General Depression in Labor and Business, etc*, 45th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 29, 390. Hereafter *1879 House Investigation—General Depression*.

Bribery and Coercion at Navy Yards

Economic voter intimidation at the uniquely structured federal navy yards scattered along the coasts operated differently than in most workplaces. Navy yards were federal institutions, so all hiring and firing on their grounds was ostensibly done by duly appointed officials of the federal government. Absent any real civil service protections, the yard bosses were generally able to control hiring and firing much as they would have done in a private factory. However, because expense and hiring reports for navy yards were eventually public knowledge, and the yards themselves were subject to loose but potentially constraining oversight by the Department of the Navy, employers who wanted to unduly influence elections had to resort to means of coercion other than discharge threats and election day control. The House Committee on Elections defined shenanigans at navy yards as bribery, but evidence collected by the committee suggested that intimidation of workers also played a role. Men who believed they had earned their wages, however meager, regularly discovered they would lose them if they did not vote as their bosses demanded on election day.⁴⁸

Somewhat coincidentally, the two most extensive examples of navy yard intimidation occurred during the same election cycle. In 1874, workers at the Charlestown navy yard just outside of Boston, Massachusetts, and the Portsmouth navy yard in Norfolk, Virginia, confronted virtually the same form of coercion during congressional elections. In both cases the politicians

⁴⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Chester H. Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest of all the Contested Elections in the House of Representatives of the United States from the First to the Fifty-sixth Congress, 1789-1901*, 56th Congress, 2d Session, 1901, Document No. 510, 317.

and bosses doing the intimidating were Republicans. Because they controlled the federal government, and thus held appointment power in the Navy Department, the Republicans were, as the House Committee on Elections noted in the Virginia case, "the party that had the work to give."⁴⁹ The way they chose to distribute those jobs in both cases took them across the hazy line from political patronage to political intimidation.

The details of the two cases were extremely similar. In both Massachusetts and Virginia, the Democratic candidates for Congress claimed that their opponents had used Republican control of the navy yards to increase the yard's workforce from between 500 and 600 to between 1,100 and 1,300 in the week or two before the election. The new employees were paid for their time, but witnesses in the contested election cases suggested that there was very little real work for them to do. Shortly thereafter, a mere two days after the election in the Massachusetts case, the Department of the Navy noticed each yard was overstocked with labor and demanded a reduction in the workforce. By December, the number of employees in each yard plunged under 300. In Massachusetts, so many were laid off that the yard could not complete standard maintenance work.

Although foremen at both yards denied any impropriety in their hiring and firing practices, the dynamics of the navy yards in October and November 1874 were suggestive of coercion. According to the hundreds of pages of testimony by current and former laborers in both yards, the yard bosses exploited bad economic conditions and the imminent onset of winter to bring hundreds of voters under their control on election day and the week or two before. Even

⁴⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Papers in the Case of James H. Platt, Jr. vs. John Goode Jr. Contested Election*, 44th Cong., 1st Sess., 1876, Mis. Doc. No. 65, 4.

though these workers knew they were temporary employees and thus were not susceptible to discharge threats, they were still vulnerable to economic threats and to control and observation at the polls. Pay day in both yards was a few days after the election, and newly hired laborers knew that their wages were held hostage to good behavior on election day. Their temporary bosses kept a close eye on their ballots, much as bosses did in other workplaces. In the Portsmouth yard the bosses "took their position immediately at the ballot-box, for the purpose of supervising the election, and checking off the names of voters as they deposited their ballots."⁵⁰ In the Charlestown yard, a foreman stood at the head of the wharf where none of the new workers could avoid him "with the ballots in his hands" that he wanted them to take to the polls.⁵¹ By withholding wages until after the election and controlling laborers' time and movement on election day, the navy yard bosses were effectively combining the threat of intimidation with the transactional relationship of bribery.

Not all suspect elections at navy yards operated under the same mix of intimidation and bribery as in Charlestown and Portsmouth. At the Mare Island Navy Yard near Vallejo, California, the methods of coercion seem to have been identical to those of any other large industrial workplace. A dozen workers testified to the California Democratic Central Committee that during a close congressional election in 1882 the men were "compelled to get their tickets at certain tables and hold them up in sight of 'spotters' until deposited in the ballot box on penalty of losing their positions." Out of the 650 men who worked at the navy yard, however, none was willing to testify publicly against his boss. They were all convinced that "if any voluntary

⁵⁰ *Papers—Platt vs. Goode*, 21.

⁵¹ *Papers—Platt vs. Goode*, 107, 101.

statements were made or facts divulged dismissal would follow." The members of the Democratic Central Committee realized there was little likelihood of success in an election contestation without witnesses and so did not pursue the case further.⁵²

The Mare Island case still rankled years later. In 1885 *The Atlanta Constitution* recounted the "disgraceful operations" that had gone on in that yard under Republican control. Denouncing navy yards—Mare Island in particular—as "sink-holes of Republican corruption and depravity," the paper explained to its readers that now that Democrats held the presidency, workers would no longer be "coerced and controlled by the foremen."⁵³ The paper's prediction was quickly borne out. A little over a month after he was confirmed in his position, the new Secretary of the Navy, appointed by Democratic President Grover Cleveland, directed the commander of Mare Island "to discharge foremen concerned in coercing votes at the several elections."⁵⁴ Democratic papers in California continued to raise the Mare Island case as a particularly disturbing example of Republican economic intimidation as late as 1888.⁵⁵ Lacking further evidence, it is difficult to determine why the Mare Island case differed from the other navy yards. It is possible that the Republican Party did not have sufficient control over the machinery of naval patronage in California to manage the complex dance of hiring, coercing, and firing. After all, the methods of discharge threats and election day control they put to work at Mare Island had proven effective in other contexts, and seem to have worked in that case as well.

⁵² "Republican Intimidation," *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer* (Lancaster PA), November 23, 1882, 2.

⁵³ "Republican Intimidation," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 28, 1885, 4.

⁵⁴ "The News in Brief," *The Rock Island Argus* (Rock Island, IL), April 24, 1885, 2.

⁵⁵ "Untitled," *Los Angeles Daily Herald*, August 8, 1888, 4, "Imitating a Great Philanthropist," *Los Angeles Daily Herald*, September 26, 1888, 4.

"In the Very Air of Almaden:" The Company Town

The methods of economic intimidation practiced in company towns were similar to those used in less totalizing workplaces. The primary difference was that employers in company towns had more levers of coercion to use against their employees, rendering economic voter intimidation far more effective. In company towns, employers controlled the employment, housing, shopping, and movement of their employees. This meant that hard evidence of voter intimidation was hard to come by. Two elections in particular shed a great deal of light on economic coercion in company towns. A case from northern California in 1886 detailed the methods of intimidation, bribery, and undue influence practiced in Almaden, the company town of the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine, while a senate committee investigation described similar techniques in the mill towns of Massachusetts in 1878-9.

Evidence that the mine owners of the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine just outside of San Jose, California, intimidated their workers during the 1886 congressional election emerges from the papers of the contested election case file of Frank J. Sullivan (D) v. Charles N. Felton (R).⁵⁶ Though defeated on election day, Sullivan was unwilling to accept the result. He persisted in the contest, compiling one of the "most voluminous" records in the memory of the clerk of the House, because Sullivan believed himself to be—and described himself in an open letter to

⁵⁶ For newspaper coverage of the case see for example: "Contested Congressional Election," *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco, CA), February 26, 1887, 3, "Latest By Telegraph: Committee Report In Favor Of Seating Sullivan And Lynch," *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco, CA), Friday, December 30, 1887, 3, "The Sullivan-Felton Contest," *Los Angeles Daily Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), June 30, 1887, 1, "Untitled," *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), July 11, 1888, 4, "Democratic Tactics: A Santa Clara Democrat Makes a 'Holy Show' of His Party," *Sacramento Daily Record-Union* (Sacramento, CA), May 14, 1887, 1.

prominent congressmen as—"a type of the perfect man... the very model of prodigious strength, combined with perfect symmetry."⁵⁷ Whether or not he was perfectly symmetrical, Sullivan was an attorney by trade and thus managed to avoid the expense of outside counsel by acting as his own legal advocate. With few financial constraints and a damaged ego desperately in need of salving, Sullivan tramped the length of the district, from San Francisco to Santa Cruz, interviewing anyone who had a story to tell about the election he had lost. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sullivan found himself spending much of his time in San Jose, the nearest open town to Almaden, where thousands of native-born, Cornish, and Mexican laborers toiled in the mercury mines and trudged home every day to shacks owned by their employers. Though he was ultimately unable to convince congress to overturn the election, Sullivan deposed hundreds of employees, former employees, teamsters, shopworkers, and delivery boys who had passed through Almaden in the previous decade, creating an unprecedented record of the coercive methods available to employers in the company towns of the Gilded Age.⁵⁸

The mechanics of election day in Almaden resembled those of coercive workplaces throughout the nation, remarkable only because of the extent of control over workers that the company town provided the bosses. Voters heading to the polls picked up their ballots from the company store, which was entirely controlled by the mine. Ballots for both parties were available

⁵⁷ "Campaign Histories," *Sacramento Daily Record-Union* (Sacramento, CA), August 27, 1887, 8; "Frank J. Sullivan v. Charles N. Felton Contested Election Case Report," House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, 50th Congress, 2nd Session, Report No. 3538, December 12, 1888 (Washington: Government Printing Office: 1888), 32.

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that voter turnout in western states like California during off-year elections was among the highest in the nation, averaging 69.1% between 1880-1898 and lagging only slightly behind New York. Mark Lawrence Kornbluh, *Why America Stopped Voting: The Decline of Participatory Democracy and the Emergence of Modern American Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 17.

at the store counter but they were of noticeably different shades.⁵⁹ Witnesses testified that when Almaden employees handed their ballot to the ostensibly non-partisan inspector at the polls, he would "hold the ballot in his hand" and read off the voter's name for the clerk before depositing it in the ballot box. The color difference was readily visible to all during this process. Meanwhile, the mine's cashier stood inside the polling place holding a book containing the names of all the registered voters in the mine. A negative mark from his pencil was widely believed to lead to instant dismissal.⁶⁰

Though he was able to produce some specific testimony about economic voter intimidation in Almaden, Sullivan also charged that the very nature of the company town was destructive of political independence. He argued that "any body of men that will submit" to such an exploitative system as the company town "would necessarily surrender the franchises to the owners of that or any other mine." Former employees confirmed that "freedom of contract... action... sale... purchase or... expression are utterly unknown" among the miners. To those willing to testify, the mine seemed a "kind of serfdom" or "slave pen." When one of Felton's attorneys asked a former employee if he had ever been a slave, he replied "no sir, never, only while I was in Almaden." Rhetoric of slavery, lack of control, and dependence fills the testimony about Almaden. In one telling exchange Sullivan asked a teamster named George Corey, who made regular deliveries to the mine store, whether it was "understood by all the people there" that voter intimidation was "in the very air of Almaden?" "Yes sir. By all," Corey replied.⁶¹

⁵⁹ This was in violation of California law, which mandated that ballots be printed on white paper. "Untitled," *Los Angeles Daily Herald*, August 8, 1888, 4.

⁶⁰ Sullivan v. Felton, HR50A-F.9.9.

⁶¹ Sullivan v. Felton, HR50A-F.9.9.

Corey and others offered an awful picture of labor conditions in Almaden. Quite reasonably, one of Felton's attorneys asked a laborer who had worked in Almaden for years and had testified that he gave up his freedom to vote and put his life at risk in the mercury tunnels why, "if it was such a terrible place that a man... would be willing to work there again?" The miner helplessly replied that "poverty will make a man do most anything." Unable to find other work, he was willing to sacrifice his vote and potentially his health for a living wage. For miners who relied on Almaden as the only stable source of employment nearby, being discharged "and thereby prevented from being able to support themselves or their wives or children," as Sullivan put it, was an existential concern. Though Sullivan failed his challenge, there is little doubt that the bosses in New Almaden exploited the economic vulnerability of their employees for political advantage.⁶²

Economic voter intimidation operated similarly in the mill towns of Massachusetts. Reacting to allegations of workplace coercion in state elections in New England in 1878 and 1879, the Democratic Senate launched a lengthy investigation. The investigative committee produced a 500 page report containing extensive documentation "that employers of labor in those states coerced their employees to vote as the employers wished, and that deprivation of

⁶² Sullivan v. Felton, HR50A-F.9.9.

employment was the penalty for refusal to do so."⁶³ Perhaps the most compelling testimony came from a former state representative, James H. Mellen, who described how little control over his life a mill worker in Massachusetts really possessed: "the operative lives in a tenement, belonging to the manufacturer; his wages are small; his wife probably works in the mill; his children probably work in the mill."⁶⁴ Any employee who seemed "fractious, or opposed to voting in the way that these people dictate," Mellen explained, would find himself and his family "turned out of the mill, out of the tenement, and out of the means of earning a livelihood."⁶⁵ The investigation rapidly focused on these mill towns, uncovering extensive evidence of how bosses exploited the dependency of their workers to subvert their vote.

Control of housing and employment meant that bosses found it relatively easy to control the political expression of their employees in these mill towns. During the 1878 gubernatorial election, a retired war-veteran named Terrence Kennedy lived with his son and relatives, most of whom worked in the Manchaug Mill in western Massachusetts. Kennedy tried to organize a speech in favor of Benjamin Butler, a renegade former Republican running on a pro-labor platform.⁶⁶ Even though he was not employed directly by the company, the tenement his family lived in was owned by the mill, and the mill owner decided to make an example of them.

⁶³ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Senate Select Committee to Inquire into the Alleged Frauds in the Late Elections*, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1880, Report No. 497, 1. Hereafter *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*. The Committee also investigated voting practices in Rhode Island, but the vast majority of the evidence came from Massachusetts. Newspaper coverage of the investigation was extensive: *Boston Globe*: "Bribing And Bulldozing Voters.: A Batch Of Affidavits Showing," *The Washington Post*, April 18, 1879, 2, "'Bull-Dozing' In Massachusetts," *Detroit Free Press*, August 19, 1879, 4, "Bull-Dozing In Gardner: The Town Is To Be Carried For Butler," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 18, 1878, 4, "Bull Dozing.: The Dying Struggle Of The Forlorn Hope," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 24, 1878, 4, "Bulldozing At Home," *Boston Daily Globe*, December 29, 1878, 4, and "Intimidation," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 22, 1878, 2.

⁶⁴ *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*, 120.

⁶⁵ *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*, 120.

⁶⁶ *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*, 17, 136.

Eviction and discharge notices were delivered to the Kennedy family before the election to impress upon their neighbors the seriousness of defying the company come election time. Still, the family was allowed to stay in town through the election and its eligible voters were permitted to freely cast their ballots. Their individual votes were less important to their bosses than their presence as living and breathing symbols of the consequences of exercising political freedom in a company town. With employment and housing in town directly controlled by the company, the family was forced to resettle miles away. One eviction notice was sufficient to cow the other Democratic-leaning workers. These "men who had families dependent upon them" snuck over at night to tell their beleaguered colleague that they still wished to vote their consciences but "it was coming near winter and they did not wish to lose their jobs."⁶⁷ After all, on election day in Manchaug, standing next to the polls handing out the company approved ticket and watching how everyone voted was the Manchaug Mill bookkeeper.⁶⁸

The Senate committee investigating the conduct of elections in New England in the late 1870s received far more complaints of employee intimidation from small mill towns like Manchaug than it did from larger towns and cities. In his testimony, former Representative Mellen sought to explain this disparity by stating that manufacturers were "more in dread of public opinion" in cities than they were in company towns "where a single individual is almost an autocrat" and no newspaper, or at least no independent newspaper, was available.⁶⁹ The tiny town of Douglas, Mass., provided the committee with a compelling example of the dynamics

⁶⁷ *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*, 4.

⁶⁸ *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*, 4-5.

⁶⁹ *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*, 116, 120.

Mellen had described. The Douglas Axe Manufacturing Company provided employment for all 300 workingmen in the town. Coincidentally the poll workers, ticket pushers, and vote challengers in Douglas were exclusively made up of the foremen and salaried employees of the company.⁷⁰ One foreman stationed himself just in front of the polls where each employee carrying their ballot "would have to pass under his eyes."⁷¹ Few made the choice to offend their employers. One of the poll-watching foremen joked to the committee that he would not "undertake to dictate to the men in the shop...they are axe makers." He claimed to fear that if he made a political suggestion to which they were averse he "would get the worst of it," but he dramatically underrated the power he held over his employees in such a town.⁷² His presence at the polls implied an economic threat, and unemployment and homelessness in the winters of 1878 and 1879 was far from a pleasant prospect. Such threats worked in part because the isolation of workers in company towns in Massachusetts meant that there was little opportunity for vulnerable workingmen to rally support or find alternative employment.

Helpful in concealing the destructive nature of economic voter intimidation in company towns was how innocuous it could seem when shorn of context. New York labor leader Peter J. McGuire explained to a senate committee in 1885 how economic coercion operated in the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company mill town in Manchester, New Hampshire, in the early 1880s. The bosses were careful, McGuire explained, to avoid "*direct* intimidation—coming to a man and saying, 'you must do this or else be discharged.'" Instead, every employee in the mill

⁷⁰ 1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry, 274.

⁷¹ 1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry, 180.

⁷² 1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry, 275.

was told "that his boss or his overseer is going to vote such and such a ticket. He is told that more than once probably, more than once a week perhaps, until the election day comes, and then his ticket is watched very closely to see how he votes." Though no threats of violence would be levied against the workers, "the system of intimidation is so wily and subtle that a man hardly feels it, but still he is made conscious of it." The mill bosses controlled every element of the context in which their employees worked, lived, and voted. That control ensured that the Amoskeag workers went to the polls with no doubt in their minds that when winter came and discharges became necessary, "a great many of them will occur among those who have not voted the ticket that their overseers desired."⁷³

Even when bosses did not have complete control of housing, leisure activities, or newspapers, simple geography frequently endowed employers with powerful levers of coercion. In such cases, the isolation inherent in itinerant extractive industries, especially in the Mountain West combined with restrictive registration laws and employers' power over work assignments to give employers extensive leverage over their employees' political freedoms. Newspapers supporting both parties detailed how mine owners moved workers to new work sites outside of their home districts just days before the election. As most counties and municipalities mandated that voters reside there for a certain amount of time before an election in order to vote, large corporations could disenfranchise workers who lived in company towns with depressing ease by simply shifting their work and living sites to a different company town. In 1889 Republicans in the territory of Montana claimed that in the territorial election the previous year "300

⁷³ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee, Volume 1—Testimony*, 48th Cong., 1885, 341-342.

Republicans in the mines were sent out of the precinct on election day, so that they could not vote."⁷⁴ After the election they were presumably allowed to return to their mine-owned homes. Just a few years later, during the heated 1896 election, a staunchly Democratic newspaper reported on the early October closure of a mine in Idaho when the miners expressed pro-Democratic sentiments. The closure meant that "several hundred miners were thrown out of employment and compelled to leave the county, thus losing their vote."⁷⁵ Like other forms of economic coercion, job transfers on or before election day took advantage of the economic precarity of workers to deny them their vote. Such methods were all the more effective when levied against men living in company towns like mining camps, as they risked losing their homes as well as their livelihoods if they protested.

During the 1884 federal elections in northern Ohio, a precinct known as Kelley's Island provided an example of how geographical isolation could warp election results even in the densely populated Midwest. Kelley's Island, located in Lake Erie just north of Sandusky, is now mostly a quaint tourist destination, but in the 1880s it was home to a large stone quarry owned by the eponymous Norman Kelley. Concerned about the effects of Democratic tariff policies on his business, Kelley threatened to discharge half of his seventy employees if the Democrats took control of the federal government. Kelley emphasized that he would "naturally expect to retain those who voted for our interest and their own" when the discharges began. Isolated on a small island with no other prospects for employment in their trade should they be discharged, the quarrymen faced the same threat to home and community as did those in company towns where

⁷⁴ "Fraud in Montana," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), November 16, 1889, 259.

⁷⁵ "Multiple News Items," *The Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), October 7, 1896; Issue 263, np.

bosses directly owned their homes. The seriousness of Kelley's threat provoked resistance. A stonecutter and Democratic poll watcher named Nicholas Smith confronted Kelley at the ballot box while he was heckling his employees. Demanding to know "why don't you let your men have their own free will?" Smith shoved Kelley, precipitating a short fistfight but failing to remove Kelley from his observation post by the polls.⁷⁶

Economic voter intimidation cases, especially in the North, rarely involved violence like that which broke out between Kelley and Smith. Democratic newspapers seized on this lack of violence to dismiss the significance of economic coercion, often with shocking flippancy. In December 1878 the generally Democratic *New York Times* reported on intimidation in the mill towns of Massachusetts with caustic sarcasm. Quoting witness testimony before the senate committee, the *Times* noted that "the employees of the Manchaug Mills were actually 'watched' at the polls... they had been watched, which was truly dreadful."⁷⁷ Lest one think the paper was taking the threat of economic voter intimidation seriously, the article remarked that no one "had heard of a Democratic voter being taken into the mill cellar and flogged, nor of employees being warned to leave the county on pain of death."⁷⁸ Months later the *Times* repeated its denunciation of the concept of economic voter intimidation, this time comparing electoral coercion in Massachusetts to "the terrors of the South Carolina shotgun and the lashes of Louisiana."⁷⁹ Tongue firmly in cheek, the paper asked whether Butler-voting mill workers had been "strangled in their own looms," or lured "into the wilds of Boston Common, and brutally drowned in the

⁷⁶ *Report—Hurd vs. Romeis*, 11-13.

⁷⁷ "Massachusetts Bull-Dozing," *The New York Times*, December 28, 1878, 4.

⁷⁸ "Massachusetts Bull-Dozing," *The New York Times*, December 28, 1878, 4.

⁷⁹ "New-England Bulldozing," *The New York Times*, August 19, 1879, 4.

historic frog-pond." The forms of coercion practiced in these company towns—threatening families, denying equal political access, and firing recalcitrant workers—were an object of derision to the *Times*, which dismissed these "various methods" by putting the phrase in sarcastic scare quotes.⁸⁰ Before the 1878 election, the Republican *Boston Herald* predicted approvingly that there would probably be "a good deal of bulldozing...of a civilized type," meaning non-violent coercion, during the upcoming election. The paper emphasized that employers would take care to ensure that the election would be "managed with decorum, adorned by noble sentiments" and without overt threats of violence.⁸¹ In company towns like Manchaug and Douglas, subtle threats were perhaps all that was required to unduly influence a voter. Dependent as they were on their bosses for employment and housing, mill workers were in no position to deny even the "civilized" methods of the Massachusetts bulldozers.

Conclusion

Most of the examples of economic voter intimidation given in this chapter involved Republican employers trying to manipulate the votes of Democratic-leaning workers. Discharge threats and control of workers on election day afflicted Republican workers too at times, but such accusations were far less common. That is not to say they did not exist. In the post-Reconstruction South in particular, Democrats more than Republicans tugged on the strands of dependence that connected white and black workers to their precarious employment. Yet, in the

⁸⁰ "New-England Bulldozing," *The New York Times*, August 19, 1879, 4.

⁸¹ The *Boston Herald* is quoted extensively in "Senate Select Committee, Frauds," Senate, 46th Congress, 240.

North and the West, and in federal navy yards across the country, economic voter intimidation was most often perpetrated by Republicans. From the perspective of the workers who were being threatened, however, the color of the ticket that was being forced on them mattered far less than the fact that it was being forced on them at all. As out-of-work coal miner James Hickey remarked in a letter to Congress about the practices of one of the largest employers in New York: "in strong Democratic districts the Erie Company was Democratic, in strong Republican districts Republican, and in doubtful districts both Democratic and Republican."⁸² By threatening their livelihoods and controlling their freedom on election day, employers robbed their employees of any semblance of political choice. Economic voter intimidation was no less damaging when it appeared as bribery in federally funded navy yards, or when it accompanied guaranteed housing and social activities in company towns. Though it is impossible to know how many votes coercion shifted in any individual election, much less over the entire three decades in which it was a crisis, the existence and effectiveness of discharge threats and observation on election day cannot be denied.

⁸² *1879 House Investigation—General Depression*, 391. A version of this quote is casually mentioned in an 1891 article in *The Monist* without any attribution, suggesting it was a widely known or at least generally uncontroversial accusation. Thomas B. Preston, "American Politics," *The Monist*; January 1, 1891; 2, 41.

Chapter Three: "A Pay-roll or a Shotgun?" Coercion and the Rhetoric of Reconstruction

On January 11, 1875, Senator Carl Schurz of Missouri rose on the floor of the U.S. Senate to defend southern Democrats' violent intimidation of African American voters. Schurz had previously split from the Republican Party over its Reconstruction policies and in this speech he sought to provide an explanation for why he believed the federal government should stay out of southern elections. Schurz acknowledged that the methods southern Democrats used to control elections—"terrorism, physical and moral... the discharge of employees from employment for political cause"—were reprehensible and should be universally denounced. But he could not help but compare what Democrats did in the South to "intimidation of another kind" that took place mostly in the North. Republicans, he claimed, had set a "most seductive and demoralizing example" of intimidation by threatening to fire laborers who worked for the federal government if they did not agree to support the party in power. As Schurz argued in his widely republished remarks, the white supremacists carrying out violent campaigns of voter suppression in the South had learned their ways from Republicans north of the Mason-Dixon line. Because of the Republican Party's use of threats to "discharge of laborers from employment" to win elections in the North, Schurz alleged, "your National Government is the chief intimidator in the land."¹ Schurz used the intimidation of workingmen in northern states to legitimize the violent intimidation of African American men in the South. As bad as things were in the South, he said, economic intimidation in the North was the nation's original electoral sin.

¹ Senator Schurz, speaking on resolution to Judiciary Committee on self-government in the state of Louisiana, on January 11, 1875, 43rd Congress, 2nd Session, *Congressional Record* 368-9, CR-1875-0111 Also in "The Latest Phase of 'Intimidation,'" From the *NY Evening Post, The Daily Argus* (Rock Island, IL), January 19, 1875, 2.

American democracy was in crisis in the late nineteenth century. The conflict centered on drawing the line between those men who were deserving and those who were undeserving of political rights. The struggle was primarily waged on two fronts. African Americans fought against white supremacists throughout the nation for the ability to use the voting rights they had won in the Fifteenth Amendment. Simultaneously, the rise of wage labor capitalism, particularly in the North, rapidly solidified the boundaries of both the wealthy and the ever-growing wage working classes. Employers exploited the dependency of these wage working employees in an effort to control their votes. Between 1876 and 1890, Democratic politicians and newspapers, seeking partisan advantage as they violently attacked biracial democracy in the South, injected a new strain of rhetoric into the ongoing debate over the meaning of universal male suffrage. Much as Senator Schurz had done on the floor of the Senate, Democrats throughout the nation used the crisis of wage labor democracy to justify and legitimize their opposition to biracial democracy.

In congressional investigations, campaign speeches, and above all in newspapers, Democrats accused Republicans of practicing economic voter intimidation against white workingmen in northern states. While there was a great deal of truth to these accusations, Democrats raised them with the intention of fending off Republicans' claims that they were violently intimidating African Americans and Republicans of all races in southern elections. Democrats argued that economic voter intimidation was as bad as or worse than anything they were doing in the South. So, in that logic, popular and congressional attention and state and federal laws should rightfully focus on northern instead of southern states. Democratic newspaper editors and politicians exploited Americans' fear that wage working men would not

prove to be safe repositories of the franchise to conceal their campaign against the political rights of African American men. This effort was remarkably effective. It helped to shape the parameters of discussion surrounding economic voter intimidation, ballot secrecy, and Americans' understanding of who could be a deserving voter for the rest of the century.

This chapter explores the nature and effect of the racialized and politicized rhetoric that connected economic voter intimidation to the real and rhetorical struggles that were being fought over Reconstruction and its legacy. Northern Republicans did indeed practice economic voter intimidation against workingmen in the 1870s and 1880s. Yet they were not the only ones. Southern Democrats levied discharge threats against, threatened to withhold farm loans from, and refused employment to African American and white Republicans. As federal troops began to withdraw from the South and Republican politicians showed less interest in protecting African American voters and officeholders, however, southern white supremacists more often employed violence and legal disfranchisement to control elections instead of economic voter intimidation.²

Meanwhile, the Panic of 1873 drove millions of workingmen into penury and gave their employers a powerful new hold on their votes. The Republican Party, because of its pro-tariff

² Eric Foner wrote that white supremacists resorted to violence in part because widespread "economic intimidation... proved ineffective" in driving black voters from the polls. Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited." *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): 82-100. 89. Subsequent scholarship followed Foner's lead. When they mentioned economic voter intimidation, historians like Morgan Kousser and Michael Perman maintained that its "effectiveness has been overrated." J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-party South, 1880-1910* (Yale Historical Publications. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 102, Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 14. See also: Kenneth C. Barnes, "Who Killed John M. Clayton? Political Violence in Conway County, Arkansas, in the 1880s," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1993): 371-404. For more on Reconstruction in the North, particularly in New York City, see Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and David Quigley, *Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

policies and control of federal patronage, had more to offer employers who controlled the fate of their desperate workers.³ Economic voter intimidation was indeed carried out more often by northern Republicans than by southern Democrats during the Gilded Age. The almost total reduction of workplace coercion to a northern problem, however, was the product of a Democratic rhetorical campaign to define it as such. In defiance of extensive evidence that employers pressed on the dependence of workingmen in all regions of the country, by 1890 Americans broadly defined violent intimidation as a southern crime and economic intimidation as a northern crime. Even more perniciously, as a result of the Democratic rhetorical campaign, many Americans came to believe both that economic intimidation was worse than violent intimidation and that white men deserved to be voters while African American men did not. These ideas wended their way deep into the ongoing debates over which voters deserved protection at the polls and which were not worthy of exercising the franchise at all.

³ For examples of Republicans using reference to tariff protection and employment opportunities as part of coercive messages see: "Intimidation of Voters, From the New York *Sun*," *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer* (Lancaster, PA), October 14, 1880, 2, "The Fate of Department Clerks Who Favor Hancock," *The Daily Gazette* (Wilmington, DE), July 7, 1880, "Latest From the Capital," *The Delaware Ledger* (Newark, DE), November 1, 1884, 3, "Papers in the Case of James H. Platt, Jr. vs. John Goode Jr. Contested Election," House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, 44th Congress, 1st Session, Mis. Doc. No. 65, January 27, 1876 (Washington: Government Printing Office: 1876), 4, and "Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of the General Depression in Labor and Business; and as to Chinese Immigration," House of Representatives, 46th Congress, 2nd Session, Mis. Doc. No. 5, December 10, 1879 (Washington, Government Printing Office: 1879), 82. Notably, *Chicago Tribune* sought to convince Irishmen to vote Republican because their employers were Republican: "Who gives him work and wages in this country? In ninety cases out of 100 Republicans, because they embrace the great bulk of the employing class." "Why Irishmen Should Vote the Republican Ticket," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 19, 1880, 4. The same power dynamics existed on the state level where Democrats were just as often the intimidators. In 1875, for example, the *Ithaca Daily Journal* accused the Lieutenant Governor of New York of using his authority over the construction of the new state capitol building to coerce employees into voting Democratic. "Untitled," *Ithaca Daily Journal* (Ithaca, NY), November 16, 1875, 2.

The Bad-Faith Democratic Press

Between 1876 and 1890, Democratic newspapers used economic voter intimidation in the North to distract from southern electoral abuses by alleging that northern election results were just as tainted as those in the South and deserved to be investigated as thoroughly. Democratic newspapers first adopted this rhetoric on a major scale during the lengthy fight over the 1876 presidential election. The conflict hinged on election fraud and voter suppression in three southern states. Republicans alleged that Democrats intimidated African American voters, while Democrats claimed that Republicans tried to steal the results of the election by corrupting the state returning boards that investigated election practices and signed off on the results. The fight lasted for months. Finally, Congressman George McCrary (R-IA), who had written the book on American election law, proposed the creation of a compromise committee which awarded the presidency to Ohio Republican Governor Rutherford B. Hayes.⁴

Democrats emerged from the affair without the presidency but with quiet assurances that the new Republican administration would withdraw federal troops from southern capitals. Democrats also temporarily gained the moral high ground when it came to electoral abuses, as national attention centered on the blatant Republican efforts to steal the election during the count. In the months after the election, however, Democrats proved extremely sensitive about Republican allegations that they had intimidated African American voters in the South. To counter these allegations, Democratic papers sought to turn the question back on Republicans by accusing them of perpetrating economic voter intimidation in the North. In December, the

⁴ Michael F. Holt, *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876* (Lawrence: U of Kansas, 2008).

Baltimore *Sun* responded to charges that Democrats had threatened to fire African American employees if they voted Republican by claiming, "Even if this were true, the same kind of intimidation was practiced in states which gave republican majorities." The *Sun* cited reports from the *Boston Post* and the *New-York Tribune* which demonstrated that "'bulldozing' is not confined to the South, much less to the democratic party."⁵ *The Weekly Advertiser* of Montgomery, Alabama, compiled a series of accusations of economic voter intimidation in Connecticut and New York and concluded that "the real intimidation of voters was not in the southern but in the northern states."⁶

The Daily Argus, a Democratic paper from Rock Island, Illinois, echoed and expanded on this sentiment in early 1877. The paper printed a series of allegations that large firms in the Midwest were intimidating their employees. But it was not just the existence of intimidation in northern states that incensed the publishers of the *Argus*. Far worse, the paper alleged, was the Republican congress' hypocrisy in how it treated coercive acts in the North and in the South. "Had that thing occurred in any southern state," the paper claimed, "congress would have sent out a committee to investigate it and would have made it a pretext for throwing out the vote of the entire state."⁷ With the nation poised on the brink of civil war over the issue of southern election improprieties, Democratic papers sought to use the existence of economic voter intimidation in the North to render southern methods less exclusively objectionable.

⁵ "Bull-Dozing Up North," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), December 7, 1876, 2.

⁶ "Northern 'Bulldozing'," *The Weekly Advertiser* (Montgomery, AL), December 4, 1876, 2.

⁷ "Bulldozing in the North," *The Daily Argus* (Rock Island, IL), January 6, 1877, 4. For a similar example see: "Intimidation of Voters in Michigan," *Detroit Free Press*, November 1, 1876, 2.

The ruckus that Democratic papers raised over workplace coercion in the North during the Hayes-Tilden affair did not die down. As southern Democrats continued the violent "redemption" of their states, Democratic politicians went in search of new rhetorical ammunition to counter Republican criticisms. As documented in Chapter Two, Republican employers intimidated mill workers on a mass scale during the Massachusetts gubernatorial elections in 1878 and 1879. The Democratic-controlled Senate dispatched a special committee led by Senator William A. Wallace (D-PA) to Massachusetts and Rhode Island to investigate those practices. The committee reported extensively on workplace threats, discharges, and observation of wage working voters by their foremen at the polls. While the investigation was carried out with care and seemingly without bias, Democratic newspapers joyously mined the committee's report for examples of Republicans' perfidy. For over a decade, Americans who sought to compare intimidation in the North with that in the South quoted or referenced the Wallace Committee's investigation.⁸

Though the Wallace Committee may have been dispatched in bad faith, it did discover compelling evidence of economic voter intimidation that was difficult to refute. In many cases, employers readily admitted to coercing their employees, arguing that they had acted to prevent a greater calamity by opposing the ignorant rule of controversial candidate Benjamin Butler.

⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Senate Select Committee to Inquire into the Alleged Frauds in the Late Elections*, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1880, Report No. 497. Hereafter *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*. For news coverage of the investigation see: "Massachusetts Bull-Dozing," *The New York Times*, December 28, 1878, 4, "New-England Bulldozing," *The New York Times*, August 19, 1879, 4, "Butler Charges Intimidation," from the *New York World*, in the *Rock Island Argus* (Rock Island, IL), October 28, 1878, 3, "New England Election Methods: Report of the Wallace Committee," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), April 20, 1880, 1, and Terence V. Powderly, "The Force Bill: General Master Workman Powderly Strongly Against It," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), July 31, 1890, 4.

During the election, the Republican *Boston Herald* even encouraged employers to coerce their employees with a telling comparison to the South. The *Herald* explained that "human nature is much the same in Massachusetts and Mississippi. Only methods are different."⁹ It was acceptable, the paper argued, to peacefully coerce voters in the North because it was happening far more violently in the South. Democratic papers pounced, alleging that the *Tribune* and Republican employers were countenancing a form of bulldozing "of a meaner type than their shot-gun relatives at the South."¹⁰ The Baltimore *Sun* gleefully quoted from Republican papers that reported on the scandal, concluding that what they described was "an insult to intelligent workingmen" that would be "resented as such, in the latitude of Maryland."¹¹ In the South, the *Sun* implied, workingmen would refuse to submit to coercion by their bosses. Only in New England were workingmen seemingly not sufficiently sensitive to attacks on their intelligence to fight back.

The Illinois Democratic paper *The Daily Argus* made explicit the comparison between economic intimidation in the North and Republican attacks on southern election methods. The paper contrasted the well publicized events in Massachusetts to "the custom among our republican friends... to accuse the white people [in the South] of intimidation, on the ground that they threatened to discharge from their employment every negro who refused to vote the democratic ticket." The *Argus* claimed that its editors would always condemn the coercion of voters, "whether they be Sixth Avenue Railroad conductors, South Carolina freedmen, or

⁹ "Bulldozing at Home," *Boston Daily Globe*, December 29, 1878, 4.

¹⁰ "The Manchaug Bulldozers," *Boston Daily Globe*, August 18, 1879, 2.

¹¹ "Do They Bulldoze in New England?," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), September 2, 1880, 2.

Massachusetts mechanics." But the paper alleged that Republicans had not been willing to admit their crime when they practiced intimidation in the North. Instead they lobbed "very effective" accusations against southern Democrats while hiding their own non-violent but still coercive methods. In that context, the paper confessed to "a little malicious satisfaction in seeing something like it brought against the respectable republicans of Massachusetts."¹²

Economic intimidation in Massachusetts allowed papers like the *Argus* to return rhetorical fire against evidence that Democrats were winning power in the South using illegitimate means. They believed that the "very effective" accusations of violence and fraud that Republicans made against southerners would lose their effectiveness if the people who made them could be proven to be hypocrites. Even better, from the perspective of the *Argus* and similar Democratic papers, southern election practices could no longer be assailed as uniquely corrupt. Republicans would have to spend so much time and effort defending themselves against accusations that they were coercing workingmen that they would be unable to effectively defend biracial democracy in the South.

The Wallace committee published the results of its investigation into economic intimidation by Republican employers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island in April, 1880. In the months that followed, the nation prepared for a presidential election that both parties expected would be as close and controversial as in 1876. During the campaign, Democrats intensified their claims that economic voter intimidation was a uniquely northern and Republican crime. The *Daily Globe* of St. Paul, Minnesota, argued that Congress should count the electoral votes of

¹² "Butler Charges Intimidation," from the *NY World*, *The Rock Island Argus* (Rock Island, IL), October 28, 1878, 3.

New York state for Democratic nominee Winfield Scott Hancock if workingmen in that state were again "intimidated by their employers to vote the Republican ticket on pain of dismissal."¹³ Congress never considered such a radical course, but Democrats frequently argued during and after campaigns that economic voter intimidation rendered northern election results illegitimate.¹⁴

The *Brooklyn Eagle* took this rhetoric further than other Democratic papers by claiming that economic voter intimidation practiced by Republican employers during the 1880 campaign marked an entirely new development in America's long history of electoral shenanigans. The *Eagle* first recounted for its readers how laborers of the Columbus Buggy Company in Ohio were "marked for discharge" if they refused to vote Republican in the 1880 election. This was no isolated case, the *Eagle* explained. Economic intimidation had also occurred in Brooklyn and in "hundreds of other towns and cities." Incredibly—meaning not credibly—the *Eagle* pronounced that this was "the first time in the history of American politics [that] laboring men were systematically terrorized" during an election. The *Eagle's* claim that 1880 marked the first instance of widespread coercion of workers in the United States was entirely incorrect, and the paper's editors surely knew it. The intent behind this false charge was to convince the reading

¹³ "What of the Outcome," *Daily Globe* (St. Paul, MN), November 9, 1880, 2.

¹⁴ The corruption during the 1880 election prompted a Chicago-based correspondent for the *Public Ledger* (Memphis, TN), to write a scorching report on voter coercion. The correspondent alleged that bribery and "the tyrannical intimidation of employees by bought-up employers" had provided the crucial votes for James Garfield in the presidential race. Angry over the tactics of a party that he denounced as "usurpers," the correspondent called on "every honest editor" in the nation to show the Republicans that their coercion of employees and other corrupt methods would be "closely scrutinized." Nayr, "Chicago Letter," *Public Ledger* (Memphis TN), November 26, 1880, 2.

and voting public that northern Republicans were the only people practicing economic voter intimidation.¹⁵

The reason that Democrats worked so hard to pin economic voter intimidation on Republicans was that Americans had begun to treat workplace coercion as an existential threat to democracy. In the aftermath of the Panic of 1873, the economic precariousness of wage laborers of all races meant that economic threats could be levied against any worker as he walked to the polls. Many white Americans who were already concerned that African American male suffrage somehow threatened their own rights and privileges were particularly worried that economic voter intimidation threatened the political standing of white men. The Democratic Party sought to indelibly connect their opponents with that threat in the public's consciousness. For example, the week before the 1880 election, Chairman McKinney of the Democratic State Executive Committee of Ohio argued that "the existence of free Government is at stake when capital seeks by coercion" to control the votes of labor. An employee who submitted to such coercion "surrenders his manhood" and took the first step toward "self-enslavement." Thus, the Chairman explained, "will money have triumphed over manhood" and destroyed the bedrock of American government and freedom: "free manhood suffrage." Republicans, he alleged, were destroying "liberty for white and colored" men alike in their hopeless effort to ensure "liberty for the colored

¹⁵ "How Workingmen Were Coerced," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 17, 1880, 2. There were other accusations of coercion in Brooklyn that year: "There is much indignation expressed in Brooklyn because the owners of the Planet mills, which employ hundreds of workingmen, have put up placards saying that the election of General Hancock means lower wages and hard times, and the success of the republican ticket means the reverse; also that if Garfield is elected their continuance is doubtful. The big sugar refiners, Havemeyer & Elder, who employ thousands, have, it is said, warned employees that they would close the establishment if Hancock is elected." "The Northern Method of Bull-Dozing," *The Daily Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), October 19, 1880, 1.

men." Lest readers miss the racial implications of the charge, Canton's Democratic paper published the letter under the title "White Slavery."¹⁶ By the early 1880s, economic voter intimidation in northern states and violent intimidation in southern states were inextricably tied together in political discourse.

Similar rhetoric recurred in 1884, as Democratic papers throughout the nation emphasized only northern Republicans intimidated workingmen at the polls. That year, the *St. Paul Daily Globe* reported on a coercion case in Connecticut by slyly commenting that "Connecticut, it is hardly necessary to remark, is on the Northerly side of Mason and Dixon's line."¹⁷ The widely-circulated New York *Sun* then took up the call, arguing that Republicans coerced their employees in a way that Democrats would never dream of attempting. The paper claimed that freedom from interference by "a capitalist giving employment" was a "time-honored Democratic idea." It bizarrely asserted that even Tammany Hall, perhaps the most notoriously corrupt political organization in the country, would never resort to such methods.¹⁸ While claiming that employee intimidation was worse than anything Tammany did was a novel defense, it was simply an extension of the now-standard Democratic rhetoric blaming northern Republicans for economic voter intimidation.

By making it effectively popular knowledge that northern Republicans were the perpetrators of economic voter intimidation, Democratic newspapers could leverage references

¹⁶ "The Campaign.: Last Call to Freemen in Ohio. The Law for the Protection of Workmen Against Intimidation, Special Dispatch to the Enquirer," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 27, 1880, 4, and "White Slavery," *The Stark County Democrat* (Canton, OH), October 28, 1880, 1.

¹⁷ "Current Comment," *St. Paul Daily Globe* (Saint Paul, MN), November 15, 1884, 4.

¹⁸ "How Will Tammany Vote?," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 16, 1884, 2.

to employer coercion to conceal and legitimize the violent intimidation their party was carrying out against African Americans in the South. The *Charlotte Democrat* of North Carolina described Republican coercion in Indiana factories in the run-up to the 1880 election and exclaimed: "talk about Democrats in the South intimidating negro voters!" The paper facetiously asked whether anything had been done in "the South towards the negro half as bad as that described above as being done towards poor white men in Indiana by the very men who abuse and slander the South?"¹⁹ The Maryland-based *Democratic Advocate* dismissed the congressional investigations that had alleged that African American voters in the South were subjected to "systematic coercion" by returning the charge. It was in northern states, the paper claimed, that "factory employees, the miners, manufacturers and laborers generally are bulldozed and turned out of their situations by their employers if they dare to vote contrary to their wishes."²⁰ In 1888, a Democratic paper in upstate New York rejected Republican claims that Democrats intimidated African American voters in the South during the recent election as "sheer folly and campaign talk." It was in northern manufacturing districts, the paper alleged, that Democratic workingmen "know that the avowal of their political preferences would cause their discharge."²¹ These papers relished lobbying whataboutisms into the suffrage debate. For every congressional investigation of intimidation in Louisiana or South Carolina that turned up

¹⁹ "Intimidation of White Voters by Radicals," *The Charlotte Democrat* (Charlotte, NC), October 29, 1880, 3.

²⁰ "Northern Bulldozing," *The Democratic Advocate* (Westminster MD), October 16, 1880, 2. For a similar example in upstate New York see "Precept vs Example," *Geneva Daily Gazette* (Geneva, NY), October 29, 1880, 2.

²¹ "Untitled," *Wyoming County Times* (Warsaw, NY), September 27, 1888, 4.

evidence of Democratic violence and fraud, they responded with a report of Republicans coercing their employees in Massachusetts or New York.²²

When Congress investigated southern electoral abuses, Democratic politicians used comparisons to economic voter intimidation in the North to deflect the charges. An early example came from a Senate committee investigating electoral abuses in Mississippi in 1877. Senator Francis Kernan (D-NY) took particular exception to Post Office Special Agent Howard's testimony of the violent and economic abuse he had suffered during elections in Mississippi.²³ Instead of engaging with Howard's evidence, the senator from New York alleged that it was widely known that "in warm political election contests, employers at the North say to their men, 'my interest is to have this party succeed, and I want you men, if you expect to work for me, to

²² The *Detroit Free Press* responded to a claim by former President Grant that "there is not a precinct in this vast nation where a Democrat cannot cast his ballot and have it counted as cast, no matter what the predominant name of the opposite party" with a lengthy recitation of economic intimidation in the North. The paper concluded that "if an unfair 'count' is a crime in the South—and it was in 1876 and will be in 1880, whether perpetrated by precinct, or county or state boards—it is equally a crime to compel voters at Washington or elsewhere in the North to cast ballots against their convictions." "Republican Oppression of the Voter," *Detroit Free Press*, October 2, 1880, 4. In similar example, a Democratic paper mocked the narrow Republican victory in Maine in 1879 by saying "the Republican vote could only be increased to the necessary point by purchase and by a resort to bulldozing methods which, when practiced in at the South, have been so severely condemned." "The Result in Maine," *Detroit Free Press*, September 13, 1879, 4. *The Christian Union*, a reformist and religious paper edited by influential preacher (and Henry George eulogist) Lyman Abbott, unexpectedly waded into the debate in 1888 in defense of the president of Bowdoin College in Maine. The president had announced his intention to vote Democratic in the upcoming election and was the recipient of a furious backlash in normally-Republican Maine, including calls that he be forced to resign. Abbott's paper claimed that in spirit "there is not the slightest difference between" the attempt to force Bowdoin's president out and "the outrages of pro-slavery mobs in years gone by, or the suppression of the colored vote in any part of the South." The paper concluded by complimenting the "courage and manliness" of the president in standing up to the "attack on free institutions" that the pressure campaign represented. "A Fundamental Right," *Christian Union* (New York, NY), September 6, 1888; 38, 10, 242.

²³ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Testimony as to the Denial of Elective Franchise in Mississippi at the Elections of 1875 and 1876*, 44th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1877, Mis. Doc. No. 45, 26. Hereafter *1877 Senate Investigation—Mississippi*. For more coverage of the Mississippi investigation and its findings on economic intimidation see "Proceedings Before the Investigating Committee," *New York Times*, January 29, 1875, 5.

vote for this party." Kernan's whataboutism did not derail the questioning entirely, but it placed Howard on the defensive. He denied having experienced any such intimidation when he lived and worked in Philadelphia, but Kernan had succeeded in forcing Howard to defend labor practices in the North instead of keeping the testimony focused on electoral abuses in the South. The ability to counter Republican charges of voter intimidation in southern states with references to northern workplace coercion was a useful rhetorical crutch for Democratic newspaper men and officeholders alike.²⁴

This rhetorical tool was particularly useful when northern politicians dared to venture South and challenge Democratic hegemony. When Benjamin Butler, running for president on the Greenback-Labor ticket in 1884, denounced the intimidation of African American voters in southern states, the *Charlotte Observer* revived the Wallace committee allegations to remind Butler and its readers that he had blamed his defeat in several Massachusetts gubernatorial races on the "despotism of employers." Laboring men in the South, the paper claimed, had a far "better showing than in New England."²⁵ Just before the 1885 Virginia state elections, *The Richmond Dispatch* similarly mocked Congressman William McKinley of Ohio for daring to come into the

²⁴ *1877 Senate Investigation—Mississippi*, 23. Coercion, fraud, and violence at the polls was a recurring problem in Mississippi, and Democrats continued to use northern electoral abuses to draw the sting of Republican attacks on their methods in that state. When the Senate again solicited testimony on Mississippi election outrages in 1884, one local Democratic Party leader forthrightly defended his party's coercive practices. The witness explained that he believed Republican rule would be so destructive to his community that "bulldozing" African American voters was not just acceptable but necessary. When Senator George Frisbie Hoar (R-MA) noted that Democrats levied the same charges of Republican misrule "all over the country" and asked if they would be justified in resorting to bulldozing everywhere, the witness dryly remarked "I think they do bulldozing just as much in New York and Pennsylvania and those States" as they did in Mississippi. U.S. Congress, Senate. *Inquiry into Alleged Election Outrages in Mississippi, in 1883—Testimony Part 2*, 48th Cong., 1st Sess., 1884, Report No. 512/2, 286.

²⁵ "Butler's Slanders," from the *Charlotte Observer* in the *Yorkville Enquirer* (Yorkville SC), September 25, 1884, 2.

South and demand a "free ballot and a free count" considering "his method of carrying elections." That method, the *Dispatch* explained, involved extensive bribery and "the intimidation of employees in the large manufacturing districts." The paper described the alleged discharges of employees throughout McKinley's district with relish, lingering on the hypocrisy of poor workingmen being "forced to vote for this paragon of political virtue or face discharge." With McKinley's arguments against southern election outrages rendered hypocritical as a result of his and his party's use of economic intimidation, the *Dispatch* could dismiss them as a "ridiculous joke."²⁶

A particularly telling example of the genre of Democratic-leaning newspapers using northern coercion to excuse southern violence came from Massachusetts-based journalist Robert Luce in 1888.²⁷ In an article for the *Boston Daily Globe*, Luce described overhearing a Republican employer cheerfully explaining to a crowded train car that he planned to threaten to fire his employees if they did not vote for Benjamin Harrison in the coming election. According to Luce this was "no fairy tale, not even an allegory." Apparently shocked at what he had heard, the journalist compared the threatened coercion of employees to the Republican party platform, which had forcefully denounced voter intimidation in the South. Suddenly Luce realized, or so he claimed, that intimidation was a "Massachusetts question as well as a Louisiana question." While he knew it was a crime in both cases, he pondered whether it was "at all essential whether the intimidator uses a pay-roll or a shotgun?" Luce accused the Republican hypocrites of

²⁶ "Ohio Heard From," *The Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), October 31, 1885, 2.

²⁷ Though he would later serve in Congress as a Republican, Luce was not sympathetic to the party in his youth. "Robert Luce," U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Historian, <https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/17214>.

Massachusetts of trying to force the leaders of Louisiana to do what they themselves had been unable to do. Quoting the bible, he commanded Republicans to "first cast out the mote which is in thine own eye!" before they turned their attention to problems far from New England.²⁸

Many of the instances of economic voter intimidation that Democrats documented and denounced were real and reprehensible. Yet, their intent in raising the issue was undeniably to protect Democratic intimidation of African American voters in the South. This intent is discernible in some of the more dramatic rhetorical choices that Democratic papers took in describing economic voter intimidation in the North. Had they merely been raising awareness of a serious problem, or even scoring some political points against their opponents, Democratic newspapers would not have attempted to claim that economic intimidation was a *worse* crime than the violent intimidation of African American voters in the South. Yet they did.

The theme that economic voter intimidation was worse than violence persisted throughout the 1880s in Democratic rhetoric. In 1882 a Democratic congressional candidate called attention to "the worst species of intimidation that there is practiced" in American elections. This form of intimidation that the future congressman denounced was not violence in the South, which he refused to admit took place. Instead it was when "Republican employers intimidate their men" in Ohio factories.²⁹ In 1883, the *Boston Globe* reported on a debate on ballot secrecy on the floor of the Massachusetts state senate. Coming just a few years after the Wallace Committee investigation, the threat of employer intimidation was immediately the focus of discussion. While several senators questioned whether the problem was serious enough to

²⁸ Robert Luce, "A Free Ballot," *Boston Daily Globe*, July 1, 1888, 12.

²⁹ "Monster Meeting," *Detroit Free Press*, October 26, 1882, 4.

require legislation, one Democratic senator demanded the enactment of ballot secrecy specifically to prevent the "civilized bulldozing of the North" which he claimed was "worse than the brutal bulldozing at the South."³⁰ The following year, the *Globe* denounced Republican economic intimidation in Connecticut as "much more reprehensible, as it is more cowardly, if less efficient," than the alleged "shotgun policy" of the Democrats in the South.³¹ Southern papers made similar pronouncements. *The Morning News* of Savannah, Georgia argued in 1890 that "there was less freedom in voting at the north than at the south." The paper drew its evidence for this claim from "well-authenticated instances of the coercion of workmen at the north."³² Not only had Democrats reframed economic intimidation as a solely northern and Republican crime, they sought to enlarge it into a worse crime than anything happening in the Democratic South.

While some Democratic papers defended their charge that workplace coercion was worse than violence by simply denying that violence was all that common in the South, many explicitly premised their position on the fact that economic intimidation in the North affected mostly white voters. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* drew a moral equivalence in 1879 between the "Massachusetts method" of intimidating mill workers that the Wallace committee had uncovered and the "South Carolina plan" of defrauding African American voters with "tissue ballots." The *Enquirer* insisted that "both should be frowned down by all good citizens." Yet, while both methods were

³⁰ "The Secret Ballot," *Boston Daily Globe*, March 13, 1883, 1.

³¹ "Cutting off their Noses: Waterbury, Conn., Republicans Trying to Boycott Democratic Merchants," *Boston Daily Globe*, November 19, 1884, 5. Similarly, the *Waterbury Evening Democrat* denounced the use of coercive political pay envelopes by Republican-leaning manufacturers in New York and Connecticut as "meaner bulldozing than any that was ever attempted in Louisiana or Mississippi." "Convincing Their Workmen," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), October 11, 1888, 2.

³² "Intimidation in Ohio," *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA), November 11, 1890, 4.

bad, the paper asserted that fraud in the South "can be justified with more reason" than coercion in the North because the latter affected the "votes of great numbers of white men."³³

During the 1888 election, *The Salt Lake City Herald* made a similar point with even greater specificity. How, the *Herald* wondered, could Republican campaigners shout again and again that "the negroes of the south shall have a free vote," while denying to "the white laborers of the north the same freedom to vote?" The paper explained that "it is notorious that in the manufacturing districts the men are not free to vote, but must vote with the boss or take their discharge." Most remarkably, the *Herald* alleged, "for every negro at the south who is denied a free vote, half a dozen white men at the north are denied the privilege of voting as they will."³⁴ The *Herald* was not alone in offering unsourced and unprovable claims about the number of white northerners who were disenfranchised compared to African Americans in the South. A "Texan" who wrote in to *The Atlanta Constitution* to oppose a new federal election law in 1889 explained that while Congress focused on imaginary problems in the South, "white laborers in the north" were so terrified of taking "the bread out of their children's mouths" by opposing their bosses that they "dare not vote as they wish." The letter writer asked whether the Republican congressional leaders knew "that there are ten men defrauded out of their votes in the north where there is one in the south?"³⁵ The rhetorical crisis that Democratic papers generated on the issue of economic voter intimidation depended on it seeming to be a threat not only to large numbers of voters, but to large numbers of white voters. Violence in the South, they implied, was

³³ "The Massachusetts Plain," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 12, 1879, 4.

³⁴ "A Free Vote," *The Salt Lake Herald* (Salt Lake City, UT), October 11, 1888, 4.

³⁵ Texan, "Letters From the People: Something Mr. Lodge Should Know," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 27, 1889, 4.

less threatening to American democracy because the voters it affected were mostly African American. In the Democratic political culture of the Gilded Age—and increasingly in the national political culture—white workingmen's political independence was necessary to sustain civilization. Black men's political independence was at best tangential to the stability of American government and industry and at worst a threat in and of itself.

Republicans Reply to "A Very Transparent Device"

Republican newspapers recognized the danger of the Democratic rhetoric concerning economic voter intimidation and fought back. They sought to draw clear distinctions between Republican and Democratic election practices, though they often conceded that economic voter intimidation was a widespread problem in the North. Republicans particularly attacked Democratic efforts to equate discharge threats with violence. In response to the investigation into Massachusetts and Rhode Island elections, the *National Republican* expressed its horror that the "leading Southern journals" would "attempt a weak justification" for intimidating African American voters by recounting the coercive actions of "a few manufacturers in New England." As the Washington, D.C.-based paper explained, even if employers had leaned on their employees to vote Republican in New England, they had not resorted to violence, and thus coercion in the North "affords no justification" for the violence and fraud targeted at African Americans in the South.³⁶

³⁶ "Untitled," *National Republican* (Washington, D.C.), December 5, 1878, 2.

The Republican counterargument to the Wallace committee's investigation was particularly vigorous. Senator Henry Blair (R-NH) fired the first shot in the Minority Report he appended to the published investigation. Blair made clear that he understood the political goal that motivated the investigations. He reminded his readers of the horrific nature of Democratic intimidation in the South and expressed his befuddlement as to why those crimes were not the focus of the committee's investigation instead of what he saw as two comparatively blameless states in New England. Blair wrote mockingly and obliquely. He complimented his colleagues in the majority for discovering in the economic intimidation taking place in Massachusetts and Rhode Island "a complete offset to the political crimes which have so often been demonstrated to constitute almost the natural order of things in some unfortunate localities in other states." Creating an equivalence between northern Republican and southern Democratic crimes was, Blair asserted, the goal of the commission. He denounced the Democratic Party for attempting to "institute a parallel between [Massachusetts and Rhode Island] and the terrible conditions which has well-nigh exterminated republican government in some less fortunate portion of our common country." Blair repeatedly avoided labeling the South as the "unfortunate localities" or "less fortunate portion" of the nation where republican government had failed, but no reader would have missed the implication.³⁷

As Democrats raised concerns over the nature and extent of employer intimidation in Massachusetts, the *New York Times* facetiously did the math. Congressional evidence and newspaper accounts demonstrated that Democrats had, through various methods, robbed "five or

³⁷ *1880 Senate Fraud Inquiry*, 14, also cited in "The Fraud Investigation: Mr. Wallace's 'Civilized Bulldozing Report Answered," *New York Times*, May 14, 1880, 2.

six millions of colored men in the South" of their right of suffrage. Meanwhile, economic intimidation, the *Times* willingly admitted, had stripped "almost as many thousand people elsewhere" of their suffrage. Not only were a thousand times more African Americans being intimidated than whites, the paper argued, the methods employed were simply not comparable. The *Times* sarcastically compared African Americans being "murdered in the South" for attempting to vote, to "men of white skins" being compelled to cast a ballot they did not believe in "by the awful threat that their wages would be cut down by fifteen percent." The attention that Democratic papers and politicians paid to the issue seemed out of proportion to its importance. Returning again to sarcasm, the *Times* wailed: "but why should we complain, so long as free-born citizens of the North vote under duress, and with distinct reference to their bread and butter?"³⁸

It was not until the Senate committee concluded its investigation that the *Times* felt it had an answer as to why economic intimidation in the North had attracted more attention than violent intimidation in the South. The paper made the case in an editorial on April 20, 1880, just a few days after the report was published, that one particular argument in the Majority Report explained why the Democratic Party had cared so deeply about "the bull-doing of the Lowell operatives."³⁹ After assessing all the evidence of undue influence in New England, the Democratic senators had concluded that "there is no remedy in Congressional action" against efforts by individuals or employers to intimidate employees. Only states, the committee argued, could legally prosecute intimidators or protect voters at the polls, meaning that the workingmen

³⁸ "Northern Bull-Dozing," *New York Times*, December 13, 1878, 4.

³⁹ "Northern Bull-Dozing," *New York Times*, December 13, 1878, 4.

in mostly Republican Massachusetts would remain at the mercy of their bosses. This, the *Times* explained, was "a very transparent device to strengthen the Democratic ideas that bull-dozing of the Southern or 'uncivilized' kind cannot be punished by federal law." While the *Times* acknowledged that employers had improperly intimidated their employees in some northern states, the practice had been "very slight and insignificant compared with the suppression of the suffrage in the South." The Democrats could "well afford to preach the doctrine that the former cannot be reached by Congress if they can thereby get any measure of immunity for the latter." Democrats, the *Times* explained, were trying to use a mostly Republican electoral abuse to legitimize their own party's ideology of federal noninterference in voting rights violations. The Democratic senators were baiting a trap. If the Republicans, in order to protect their methods of economic intimidation in northern states, agreed that the federal government had no right to intervene to protect voters from coercion, then the same would have to be true in southern states where Democrats were engaged in a violent campaign against biracial democracy.⁴⁰

Republican papers fought fire with fire. They responded to Democratic allegations that economic intimidation was as bad as violence by contesting their opponents' evidence, mocking their claims, and firing off counteraccusations. In its coverage of the New England investigation, the Republican *New-York Tribune* denied that workingmen had been threatened with discharge and mocked Democrats for claiming that this virtually non-existent problem was "just as bad as the shooting of Radical niggers at the South."⁴¹ The Chicago *Inter Ocean* reminded its readers that political campaigns in the South ran on "the elements of proscription, intimidation, and

⁴⁰ "Editorial Article 3 — No Title," *New York Times*, April 20, 1880, 4.

⁴¹ "Bulldozing among the Yankees," *New-York Tribune*, April 22, 1880, 4.

coercion." In comparison, the paper claimed, "no appliances to coerce" existed in Northern elections.⁴² Yet Democrats had claimed the rhetorical high ground in the struggle over the meaning of economic voter intimidation. By exploiting real fears over the threat that workplace coercion posed to universal manhood suffrage and white men's political rights, Democratic newspapers and politicians were able to use the existence of economic voter intimidation to counter attacks on the violent redemption of southern states they were engaged in throughout the late-1870s and 1880s.

The Master Workman and the Federal Elections Bill

Democrats' rhetorical reframing of economic voter intimidation as a Republican crime targeted at white Democratic working-class voters in the North was remarkably effective. The influence of this rhetoric was recognizable in the 1890 debate over the Federal Elections Bill, what Democrats termed the "Force Bill." The bill was a Republican attempt, the last attempt as it turned out, to protect African Americans from violence and intimidation at the polls. While contemporary observers focused on its promise to end southern election outrages, the bill offered unprecedented protection to voters nationwide. Politicians and newspapers from across the nation weighed in on the controversial bill. One of the most prominent voices in the struggle was Knights of Labor General Master Workman Terence Powderly. His arguments against the bill

⁴² "Campaigning in the South." *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), August 17, 1878, 4. A prominent Montana Republican admitted that coercion existed in the North but blamed Democrats for using in the Mountain West the same coercive "methods by which the South is kept 'solid.'" "Fraud in Montana," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), November 16, 1889, 259. Democratic papers retorted that it was the Republicans who used "federal power to intimidate workingmen" in Montana by parading an army of U.S. Marshals past the polls during the election, echoing claims of Republican "bayonet" rule in the South during Reconstruction. "Untitled," *The Helena Independent* (Helena, MT), October 1, 1889, 2.

demonstrated the pervasiveness of the Democratic argument that voter intimidation in the South was no worse than economic voter intimidation in the North. Powderly, who had fought for secret ballot protections for workingmen for years, was incensed that the bill threatened to undermine his cherished state secret ballot laws. He also may have been upset that Congress was considering federal legislation seemingly aimed at protecting African Americans at the polls rather than the white workingmen he represented. Powderly denounced the bill twice—first in an open letter to all members of the Knights of Labor in July and then in an article in the widely-read journal *The North American Review* in September. Nearly fifteen years after Democrats began to argue that northern coercion excused southern violence, that rhetoric had become inescapable at every level of political discourse.⁴³

Powderly's first letter based his opposition to the "Force Bill" on the grounds of African Americans' inferiority and lack of manliness. If they "lack the manhood to defend their ballots with their lives at the polls," Powderly remarked, then they "are not the kind to be privileged to vote." This racist claim ran counter to Powderly's long record of advocating for increased ballot protections for white workingmen in the North, but it echoed a strain of Democratic rhetoric in

⁴³ The Knights of Labor had a history of employing rhetoric that balanced northern coercion with southern frauds. In 1886 the *Labor Herald*, the organization's official paper in Richmond, Virginia, echoed the Democratic party line. "Southern Democratic tissue ballots have been offset by northern Republican corporation intimidation and open vote-buying," the paper alleged. And when it came to "matters of principle, there is also but the slightest difference between them." Powderly built on this rhetorical foundation to launch his attacks against the Federal Elections Bill in 1890. The labor paper's argument differed from the widespread Democratic rhetoric solely in its emphasis on southern frauds rather than violence. This may have reflected the experiences of members of the Knights in Virginia politics, particularly during the contentious struggle between the conservative Democratic institution and the biracial Readjuster coalition that reached its peak in the late 1880s. "Throw Off the Party Collar," from *Budget* in *The Labor Herald* (Richmond, VA), May 22, 1886, 1.

previous decades.⁴⁴ Powderly then pivoted to a comparison between abuses in the South, where "the democratic party does its best to intimidate the colored citizens," and the North, where "the employers of labor intimidate the workmen in the interest of the republican party." While Powderly seemingly acknowledged that both forms of coercion were wrong, he argued that southern Democrats had a better reason for resorting to undemocratic methods. While southern whites had to contend with the real possibility of "negro" or "ignorant rule," northern employers had no such "respectable an excuse" when they engaged in coercion. After all, white workingmen had proven themselves to be trustworthy holders of the suffrage for many years.⁴⁵

Powderly's second salvo against the Federal Elections Bill contained a far more detailed description of the nature of economic intimidation. He wrote this second piece for a general audience rather than for the workingmen of his own organization, who were perhaps more familiar with the mechanics of workplace intimidation. Much of Powderly's letter recounted the most sensational evidence of employer coercion from the Wallace committee investigation of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. After detailing for his readers the horrors of workplace coercion in the North, Powderly sought to spring the trap that the Democratic majority had embedded in the report a decade previously. He argued that because the Senate investigation had concluded that "suffrage is under the control of the States, and not of the Federal government," there had been nothing the senators could do for the coerced workers of Massachusetts and so

⁴⁴ For example, a letter to the editor of the *New-York Tribune* in 1877 explained that economic threats worked against African Americans because of "the habit of servility and deference to the superior race, which generations of slavery and submission have impressed upon the negro's character." L, "Letter to the Editor: Mild Forms of Intimidation: Employment Refused for Political Reasons—Instances in Louisiana," *New-York Tribune*, February 17, 1877, 4.

⁴⁵ Terence V. Powderly, "The Force Bill: General Master Workman Powderly Strongly Against It," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), July 31, 1890, 4.

now there was nothing they could do for the intimidated African American voters of the South. This was precisely the argument that the *New York Times* had warned against after the report was published. Instead of universal federal election laws, Powderly advocated for enacting ballot secrecy at the state level to stop coercion and for increased education for voters both black and white.⁴⁶

The remainder of Powderly's letter followed familiar tropes. He pondered whether "we require protection in the Democratic South any more than we do in the Republican North" and equivocated over the moral difference between violence and intimidation. Were southern methods worse because they entailed "brutal assaults, shootings, mobbings, and violent demonstrations?" Not necessarily, Powderly explained, as employer coercion in the North was just "a more refined system of doing violence" to prospective voters. Through the economic intimidation of workingmen, the Republican Party had reached a level of "perfection of its methods of intimidation" that southern Democrats simply had not approached.⁴⁷

While Powderly's writings against the Federal Elections Bill echoed the worst tropes of Democratic rhetoric, his opposition may have been principled on at least one level. The earliest version of the bill, introduced in the House by Congressman Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA), mandated that all elections to the House of Representatives be conducted by compulsory secret ballot. Powderly was surely thrilled by the strong secret ballot provision in Lodge's bill when it was reported to the House Committee on Elections in January 1890. However, the secret ballot

⁴⁶ Terrence V. Powderly, "Article 1 — No Title," *The North American Review*, September 1890; 151, 406; *American Periodicals*, 266.

⁴⁷ Terrence V. Powderly, "Article 1 — No Title," *The North American Review*, September 1890; 151, 406; *American Periodicals*, 266.

provision was stripped out of the Senate version of the bill in March, and the House followed suit in May.⁴⁸ Even worse, when the Federal Elections Bill reached the House floor in June, Democratic representatives claimed that its supervisory provisions threatened to violate the hard-won protections of ballot secrecy in those states where it already existed. One congressman from New York tried to add an amendment to the bill that explicitly banned actions by employers "calculated to influence the political opinion or action of his employees."⁴⁹ Lodge, with the support of the Speaker of the House, pushed these arguments and amendments aside to speed passage of the bill before the midterm elections. Powderly saw nothing in the Federal Elections Bill that the House passed on July 2, 1890 that would protect workingmen from their employers at the polls.

Yet, if Powderly opposed the Federal Elections Bill because of its lack of a ballot secrecy provision, the rhetoric he employed in his denunciation had little to do with the principles of ballot reform. The ideas and phrases that Powderly used to justify his opposition to the Federal Elections Bill proved just how effective the Democratic argument that economic intimidation in the North legitimized violent intimidation in the South had been. His position was indistinguishable from that of hundreds of newspaper articles and Democratic political speeches on the subject in the preceding decade.

⁴⁸ "Washington Letter," *The Enterprise* (Wellington, OH), Jan. 22, 1890, 4, "Mr. Lodge's Election Law," *The Indianapolis Journal* (Indianapolis, IN), March 16, 1890, 1, "Untitled," from the *Pittsburgh Times*, in *The Forest Republican* (Tionesta, PA), March 19, 1890, 2, "Federal Elections," *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA), March 17, 1890, 1, "Washington Letter," *Shenandoah Herald* (Woodstock, VA), May 23, 1890, 2.

⁴⁹ Congressman Tracey, on the Federal Election Law, on June 30, 1890, 51st Congress, 1st Session, *Congressional Record-House* 6781.

The Democratic rhetoric surrounding economic voter intimidation was so powerful and pervasive that Speaker of the House Thomas Brackett Reed (R-ME), writing for *The North American Review* the same month that Powderly's first letter was published, willingly admitted that the North had "by no means reached the perfection of self-government." The biggest blot on the region's record, Reed confessed, was the reality that "in manufacturing districts" in the North, employers exerted "undue influence" on their employees. In 1880 Reed had been accused of benefitting from the economic intimidation of Portland's municipal road crews, so he was certainly aware of the existence and seriousness of coercion in northern elections. He maintained, however, that the nonviolent character of northern intimidation meant that it was not comparable to southern abuses. "There is a point beyond which no employer dares to go," Reed claimed, and without the threat of violence, economic intimidation was not as effective at controlling votes as people like Powderly claimed.⁵⁰

The road workers who allegedly had been coerced into voting for Reed in 1880 had feared only the loss of their jobs, not their lives. That, Reed maintained, was a critical difference. While he was willing to acknowledge the existence of employer intimidation in the North, and even tacitly accept his party's principal responsibility for it, he was unwilling to concede that it justified Democratic violence in the South or was its moral equivalent. Reed admitted that it did indeed count as intimidation "when an employer intimates to some of his workmen that he cares most for men who look after his interests." But was it truly the same crime as when southern white men "go forth to fire guns all night" before each election to threaten African American

⁵⁰ Thomas B. Reed, "The Federal Control of Elections," *The North American Review*, Vol. 150, No. 403 (June, 1890), 671-680.

voters away from the polls? While "murder and catching fish out of season are both crimes," Reed slyly noted, but there was a difference in seriousness between the two offenses.

Reed was not alone among Republican defenders of the Federal Elections Bill in making the distinction between election abuses in the North and South. A month before Reed's article appeared, Congressman Lodge, Reed's close friend and the bill's principal sponsor, wrote an article on the subject in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Lodge differentiated between "bribery and intimidation" which happened "chiefly" in the North and "fraud and violence" which he argued were mainly of "Southern extraction." Both were crimes worthy of federal intervention, but Lodge emphasized the effect the Federal Elections Bill would have on preventing southern violence.⁵¹ By marking violence as southern and intimidation as northern, Reed and Lodge both sought to emphasize the horrific violence of anti-African American intimidation in the South. They forthrightly denied the bad-faith Democratic argument that coercion in the North was just as bad as or worse than violence in the South, but after more than a decade of repetition, they accepted as true the Democratic talking point that economic voter intimidation was a northern and Republican crime that principally afflicted white voters.

Conclusion

The increase in economic voter intimidation in the 1870s, while destructive to thousands of individuals, did not become a crisis of democracy naturally. It was shaped into a crisis, a rhetorical one, under the prodding of the partisan Democratic press and its political allies. This is

⁵¹ Henry Cabot Lodge, "Honest Elections," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), May 3, 1890, 274.

not to say that economic intimidation did not happen. It absolutely did, and at levels unprecedented in American history. By tying their political opponents to a widely despised form of election fraud, Democratic papers and politicians sought to delegitimize Republican attacks on southern Democratic election outrages. This rhetorical campaign redefined economic voter intimidation in American political discourse into a solely northern and Republican crime.

By the mid-1880s the national image of the coerced workingman was of a white, Democratic, and northern factory worker. Thus, the remedies that reformers proposed to prevent economic voter intimidation were designed to protect that worker alone. As the Democratic committee investigating economic voter intimidation in New England in 1879-1880 had intended, legal efforts to protect voters from coercion, most notably the secret ballot, were passed at the state, not the federal level. Southern states lagged far behind the rest of the nation in their passage of secret ballot laws. By the time Powderly and Reed crossed swords over the Federal Elections Bill in 1890, the parameters of the debate over workplace coercion had been well established. As much as they disagreed over policy, the two men shared a common rhetoric when it came to economic voter intimidation. While Reed maintained the principle that violence and economic coercion were not equivalent, he ceded from the very beginning the ground on which coercion took place. Reed and Lodge's willingness to accept that economic voter intimidation was solely a northern crime demonstrated that the Democratic rhetorical campaign to make this form of coercion a problem afflicting white Democratic workingmen in the North had generally triumphed.

Chapter Four: "My Vote is as Good as Jay Gould's:" Manhood, Independence, and the Labor Question at the Polls

"When the voters are slaves, any thing may be tolerated which enables them to throw off the yoke. The strongest case for the ballot is when the mischievous power of the Few over the Many is increasing."

-John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 1861

Michael H. Enwright was a little bit nervous. Forty years old in 1883 and with little formal education, Enwright worked as an oarsman rowing back and forth across Boston Harbor in "hard weather."¹ He had also done a brief stint in the Navy and worked as a porter in a local grocery store. Nothing in his life, however, had prepared him to sit face to face with the nine U.S. senators who had come to Boston, Massachusetts, to learn the causes of what many were already referring to as "The Labor Problem." Henry W. Blair (R-NH), chairman of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, recognized Enwright's discomfort and gently encouraged him to "dismiss all feeling of that sort. What we want is a simple, plain talk."² The oarsman gathered himself and, despite expressing concern that he would be fired from his job for his testimony, launched into a lengthy discourse on the precariousness of urban life as an unskilled laborer in an era of frequent panics, low wages, and mass unemployment.³ Enwright recounted the struggle to buy sufficient flour for his children, the intolerable pressure of immigrant labor on wages, and his worries about high rents and unsafe

¹ Enwright explained to the committee that testifying could possibly "affect my position" if his employer disapproved of what he had to say. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee, Volume 3—Testimony*, 48th Cong., 1885, 403. Hereafter *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v3*.

² *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v3*, 398.

³ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v3*, 403.

working conditions. But alongside his nervous testimony of hardship and struggle in the labor market, Enwright again and again asserted his political equality.

When he discussed the economic and social inequalities that separated him from the distinguished senators, his sentences were short, pleading, almost apologetic. But interspersed between those pleas were powerful declarations of equality and righteous anger. "I am a workingman," Enwright pronounced, "and socially and financially I am hardly the equal of thousands of men, but physically, politically, and morally I am the equal of any man." Here was the point the oarsman was determined to deliver to the senators: While at work, Enwright's world was entirely controlled by his boss. When he set down his oars and walked to the polling place, however, he entered "upon the plane of political equality—where my vote counts... the manufacturer's vote is no more than mine." There was no trace of nervous obsequiousness left, no fear of consequences, as the oarsman reminded the senators that "my vote is as good as Jay Gould's or Vanderbilt's; it counts one."⁴ His earnest testimony to the senators boiled down to a plea that the inequalities of the workplace not be allowed to seep into the polling place, where he claimed, "we are all equal."⁵

Economic voter intimidation of wage-working men undermined the core tenets of what legal historian Barbara Young Welke called the "borders of belonging." State and federal laws regarding voting, property holding, and freedom of movement in nineteenth-century America were designed to protect the privileges of its white, male, and able "first citizens." Even as enslaved African Americans gained their freedom and the right to vote, and as women fought

⁴ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital* v3, 398.

⁵ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital* v3, 400.

coverture and disenfranchisement, white men crafted laws and social practices that prevented them from gaining full equality and moving within those borders. As Welke argued, the right to be free from "coercion without due process of law" and the ability to exercise "the right to suffrage" were core privileges of being white, male, and able to provide for oneself.⁶ In 1890 the *New York Times* made the connection explicit. The ballot, the *Times* explained, was a man's "title to manhood and free citizenship."⁷ By undermining workers' economic independence, whiteness, and manhood, economic voter intimidation exposed their inability to resist coercion and compromised their right of suffrage. It eroded the legal and societal standing of white workingmen, who believed that their gender, race, and ability guaranteed them "first citizen" status.

If American workingmen, particularly white American workingmen, did not believe they possessed a privileged status in America's hierarchies, and grew to believe their interests were aligned with fellow workingmen regardless of race rather than their employers, the consequences promised to be dire for the nation. Some conservative elite reformers, terrified that the growing ranks of enfranchised immigrant laborers would overwhelm the native born and educated populations, pushed to limit universal male suffrage. Men like E.L. Godkin and Charles Francis Adams, Jr. saw the potential threat that enfranchised and radicalized workingmen posed to the status quo and attempted to strip them of their franchise.⁸ Labor advocates and more liberal elite

⁶ Barbara Young Welke, *Law and the Borders of Belonging in the Long Nineteenth Century United States*, New Histories of American Law (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

⁷ "The American Workman," *New York Times*, March 12, 1890, 4.

⁸ Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 96.

reformers shared some of these concerns, but instead of seeking to limit the ability of workingmen to access the polls, they fought to protect their right to vote and expand its power. Some, Henry George most famous among them, argued that revolution and civilizational collapse would ensue if white workers came to believe that their sense of political equality had been undermined by coercion.⁹ George and others argued persuasively that the combination of awful economic conditions and employer intimidation turned workingmen into wage slaves without equal rights. If a remedy for coercion could not be found, American workers would lose faith in the democratic process and resort to violence.

This chapter explores how working-class people and their advocates confronted economic voter intimidation and fought for reforms that would curb it. This chapter makes two arguments. First, in the late-nineteenth century thousands of white American workingmen like Michael Enwright conceptualized the threat of economic voter intimidation as an assault on the central pillars of their identity as American citizens: their independence, whiteness, and manhood. Second, labor leaders, reform activists, and politicians worried that the coercion crisis, in part by threatening the privilege that their whiteness and maleness should have guaranteed them, rendered workingmen vulnerable to appeals from violent agitators—socialists and anarchists and the like—to overthrow the state. Economic voter intimidation made the inequalities and structural defects of American democracy and capitalism real to thousands of precarious and angry workingmen.

⁹ For more on George in this context see O'Donnell, *Henry George* as well as Robert E. Weir, "A Fragile Alliance: Henry George and the Knights of Labor," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 56, no. 4 (1997): 421-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3487326>.

Henry George and the Crisis of Coercion

When it came to describing the threat that the economic precariousness of wage laborers posed to democracy, no American commanded as large an audience during the Gilded Age as Henry George. A journalist, self-trained political economist, and unsuccessful candidate for Mayor of New York, George had experienced poverty and studied the pernicious effects of massive railroad corporations on labor while working as a reporter and printer in San Francisco. He published his ideas in 1879 in a 600-page treatise called *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth*. Despite the dry title, George's book was a hit with educated reformers and barely literate workingmen alike, challenging the Bible in some years for the title of most read book in the country.¹⁰ George had credibility among workers due to his early years toiling as a wage laborer and his membership in a printers union. He also wrote with an eye toward wide readability and comprehension.¹¹

The most important factor in the book's startling popularity, however, was its impeccable timing. As historian Edward T. O'Donnell argued, the book appeared "at precisely the moment when American wage earners were confronting the harsh realities of industrial capitalism's ascent, realities that convinced them the republic was in crisis."¹² The advancements and

¹⁰ "The work on which his fame mainly rests is *Progress and Poverty*, perhaps the most widely read book of this age. It has been translated into almost every modern language." "The Labor Party: The New York Platform—Sketch of Mr. Henry George," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), September 25, 1886, 6.

¹¹ O'Donnell, *Henry George*, 155. Carl S. Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 211.

¹² O'Donnell, *Henry George*, 154.

efficiencies of industrialization had produced a "Labor Problem" in the late nineteenth century that contained an ever-expanding web of seemingly unsolvable crises. Labor historian Rosanne Currarino summed up the problems facing wage workers succinctly: "proletarianization, drastic economic instability, worker unrest, and a volatile job market."¹³ George was well aware of the dangerous state of affairs in 1879. In the book, he cautioned that economic inequality was causing "increased bitterness among the working classes."¹⁴ Drawing on his own experience as a workingman and his somewhat limited knowledge of world history and economics, George set out to propose solutions to the vexing labor problem.

Though he was not at first involved in labor organizing and politics, George's writings quickly became a pillar of labor, socialist, and even mainstream reform thought. His ideas were invoked in every arena in which the labor problem was discussed and his book became required reading for reformers, socialists, and labor advocates of every stripe. One Knights of Labor assembly in Chicago devoted the first twenty minutes of every meeting to a reading from *Progress and Poverty*.¹⁵ When the United States Senate investigated the conditions of labor and capital in 1883, the committee was confronted by constant references to George's work. Several workingmen wrote letters to the committee invoking his theories as suggestions for solving the

¹³ Rosanne Currarino, "The Politics of "More": The Labor Question and the Idea of Economic Liberty in Industrial America," *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 17-36, 17. For more on the labor problem see Currarino, *The Labor Question in America*; Smith, *Urban Disorder*; Nicolas Barreyre, "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 4 (2011): 403-23, 403.

¹⁴ Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth*, Originally published in 1879 (New York, Random House, The Modern Library: 1929), 542.

¹⁵ O'Donnell, *Henry George*, 153.

"Labor Problem."¹⁶ One workingman from New York named Robert John wrote a letter to the committee entreating them to enact a radical reformation of the labor system. John apologized for not being able to give evidence before the committee in person, claiming that he was "a man of family" and if he tried to do so he "would be discharged as soon as my employers could find a fitting opportunity." In lieu of his testimony, John submitted as evidence to the committee a copy of *Progress and Poverty*.¹⁷

Central to George's understanding of American society was his belief that the rise of industrial capitalism posed a fundamental threat to workingmen's political equality.¹⁸ Much of the lengthy book explained George's plan for a single tax on land to break up large speculative landholdings and create a society based on mutualist and cooperative lines. Towards the end, however, he explained to his legions of working-class readers that "political equality, coexisting with an increasing tendency to the unequal distribution of wealth, must ultimately beget either the despotism of organized tyranny or the worse despotism of anarchy."¹⁹ For George, the increase in dependence among American workers was not just an economic problem. Because these wage workers were voters, their dependence posed a critical threat to democracy, one he evoked in the hopefully now familiar terms of economic voter intimidation.

¹⁶ See letters from "A Workingman" from Boston, Massachusetts, and from E.C. Alphonse of Orange, New Jersey, "Senate Committee on Labor and Capital Volume 2," 388, 392.

¹⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee—Volume 2*, 48th Congress, 1885, 1328. George's book was so popular, and formed such an important part of the cultural zeitgeist, that an expert testifying to the same committee on the seemingly unrelated need for an international copyright law for literature used it as an example of how the lack of such a law harmed American authors. While *Progress and Poverty* was being published in "many of the languages of Europe," the expert explained, George "has not made a penny" on sales outside the United States. "Senate Committee on Labor and Capital Volume 2," Senate, 48th Congress, 955.

¹⁸ O'Donnell, *Henry George*, 159.

¹⁹ George, *Progress and Poverty*, 530.

George described the problem of economic voter intimidation only once in *Progress and Poverty*. Nested within his description of the dangers the present system posed to working-class republicanism, it offered a brief but critical warning. George compared the labor problem afflicting the American Republic to the way the fall of the Roman Empire "compelled every freeman to seek a lord."²⁰ George noted that "when one is master and the others serve, the one will control the others, even in such matters as votes." He offered a contemporary example, explaining that "just as the English landlord votes his tenants, so does the New England mill owner vote his operatives."²¹

George was well aware of economic voter intimidation and the threat it posed to democracy and equality. He referenced it in his writings as early as 1871, and he understood the mechanics of how—in a nation that had "beggars in our streets and tramps on our roads"—economic dependency posed dangerous consequences for the right to vote.²² Rising inequality in general and industrial depressions in particular were responsible, George argued, for the "narrowing and weakening" of faith in republican institutions like the ballot.²³ Even if the poor were able to maintain a theoretical right to vote, the dependence of wage laborers and tramps on their bosses risked "transmuting races of freemen into races of slaves."²⁴ George's millions of readers, tens of thousands of whom purchased an inexpensive "workingman's edition" of the

²⁰ George, *Progress and Poverty*, 535.

²¹ George, *Progress and Poverty*, 535. It is probable that George was referencing the special Senatorial investigations of Massachusetts and Rhode Island described in chapters two and three. The results of the committee's work were not published until a year after *Progress and Poverty* went to print, but the investigation was covered extensively in the national press during the time that George was finalizing his book.

²² George, *Progress and Poverty*, 546.

²³ George, *Progress and Poverty*, 537.

²⁴ George, *Progress and Poverty*, 532.

book in 1883, walked through this chain of logic with him. They learned that democracy and industrial capitalism fundamentally clashed on the issue of workers' independence, and that the connection between the workplace and polling place was the most dangerous element of the crisis.

The success of *Progress and Poverty* rendered George an expert on the "Labor Problem." A Senate committee investigating the issues called him as a witness and engaged him in discussion and debate for an entire day. He explained that the labor problem in general, and economic voter intimidation in particular, threatened to plunge America into a socialist revolution. George argued that the increase in socialist ideas among the working classes was the result of "a disquiet, an unrest, a feeling that something is wrong in the condition of things which exists now."²⁵ One of the most important things that had gone wrong for the working classes, George testified, was that they were being intimidated by their bosses at the polls. He recounted for the senators a story he had heard from a man in a New England company town. The company which dominated the town was owned by an English firm whose local superintendent was "very anxious that" his workers should "vote for a high protective tariff." By reminding his workers that the company owned their homes and controlled their means of income, the superintendent sought to exercise his power "over them not only as to their work, but as to... their voting."²⁶

George chose a striking metaphor to explain to the listening senators how dangerous this kind of coercion could be. These New England factory operatives were, he remarked, "as much

²⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee—Volume 1*, 48th Cong., 1885, 525.

²⁶ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v1*, 489.

enslaved as the Mexican peon is."²⁷ While George's testimony in this regard was based on third-hand information, it was consistent with the more thoroughly sourced allegations that congress had investigated in New England in 1879-1880. His testimony strongly echoed the passages on economic voter intimidation in *Progress and Poverty*, including his comparison to slavery. In place of the Roman metaphor he employed in *Progress and Poverty*, however, when speaking to the senate committee he chose to use the racialized metaphor of Mexican peonage. Perhaps it was an attempt to impress upon the senators the potential racial consequences of coercion. Whether to his millions of readers or to an audience of influential senators, George's message was the same: economic inequality posed a threat to democracy, labor prosperity, and American society as a whole.²⁸

The Slavery Comparison

By comparing economic voter intimidation to slavery, George dramatized the importance of the issue to his listeners, whether senators or the workingmen reading his book. The existence of chattel slavery within an ostensible republic before the Civil War had provoked discomfort among politicians from the nation's founding and provided abolitionists with ready rhetorical ammunition against slavery. After the war, slavery served as a comparison for any number of

²⁷ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v1*, 489.

²⁸ For more on New Mexican peonage and its relation to labor coercion see Stacey L. Smith, "Emancipating Peons, Excluding Coolies: Reconstructing Coercion in the American West," in Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur, *The World the Civil War Made* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 46-75.

lesser evils, from Mormon polygamy to tariff rates to economic voter intimidation.²⁹ When advocates like George and others employed it to emphasize the dangers of coercion, however, they often engaged both its literal meaning and its rhetorical weight as America's worst evil. By invoking slavery as a metaphor for economic voter intimidation, Americans advocating against this form of coercion were making the argument that coerced workingmen were losing their economic independence, racial caste standing, and manhood.

Labor advocates also invoked the rhetoric of slavery to emphasize the dangers to manhood suffrage inherent in economic voter intimidation. They particularly worried that workingmen losing their freedom to vote as they chose was only the first step in a downwards spiral into slavery in everything but name. One socialist witness testifying to a congressional committee in Chicago described the way bosses bulldozed employees at the polls as evidence that "slavery is not abolished."³⁰ The threat to the right to freely vote meant to another socialist-leaning witness that workers had "the same liberty as the negro slave had in the South."³¹ Charles H. Litchman, a shoe manufacturer, attorney, and representative of a trades union in Boston testified that coercion of employees at the polls was just one element of their employers' efforts to "fasten chains more securely around the workingmen."³² The invocations of slavery in the

²⁹ One article in the *New York Times* after the 1888 presidential election both accused employers of intimidating their employees and compared the tariff to slavery: "The Democratic gain would have been 200 larger had it not been for the intimidation of the railroad companies." The paper then quoted Senator Voorhees (D-IN): "We will continue to educate the masses until the people revolt against the present iniquitous system of tariff plunder as they revolted against slavery." "The Time Was Too Short.: Senator Voorhies on the Campaign of Education," *New York Times*, November 16, 1888, 5.

³⁰ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of General Depression in Labor and Business; and as to Chinese Immigration*, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 5., 154-5. Hereafter *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*.

³¹ *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 163.

³² *1879 House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 432.

congressional testimony of socialist witnesses marked the seriousness with which Americans who encountered the problem of coercion had begun to treat it by the late 1870s. As Litchman put it, nothing less than "the safety of the republic" depended on the protection of workingmen's right to vote.³³

Democratic newspapers frequently used the metaphor of slavery to describe the elements and effects of economic voter intimidation, but with a slightly different motivation than labor advocates.³⁴ These papers used the comparison between slavery and coercion to rally party support just before elections. Their editors evidently believed that the threat to workingmen's white supremacy and independence would rally them to the Democratic Party at the polls. In just one example of how common this metaphor was in election coverage, three newspapers in the Midwest published extremely similar arguments, each from a different source, on consecutive days in late-October 1880. The *Daily Intelligencer* of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, argued on October 26th that "independence is the jewel brightest of all to the workingman. To be deprived of it is to be a slave." The paper explained that an employer steals his employee's independence when he "coerces or intimidates" him at the polls, lowering him "to the condition occupied by the slave made free by civil strife."³⁵ On October 27th the Chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party denounced the coercion of workers by their bosses at the polls in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*

³³ 1879 *House Investigation—Labor, Business, and Chinese Immigration*, 432.

³⁴ One Indiana Democratic paper expressed its belief that "it is un-republican, undemocratic, un-American, immoral, treasonable, cowardly and brutal for an employer of labor to discharge men from his service because of their political opinions... We say very broadly that no Christian, no patriot, nobody in short but a selfish, unscrupulous, bigoted partisan would 'stoop so low' as to attempt to coerce the political action of his fellow citizens because he chances to be buying their labor from them." "Must We Have a Rich Man's Government," *The Indiana State Sentinel* (Indianapolis, IN), October 10, 1888, 4.

³⁵ G.S.L., "Rights of Workingmen," *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer* (Lancaster, PA), October 26, 1880, 2.

as "the first step toward self-enslavement."³⁶ And on October 28th the *Stark County Democrat* of Canton, Ohio, made the comparison even more explicit, printing a letter to the editor alleging widespread coercion of workingmen under the title "White Slavery."³⁷

One of the elements of coercion rhetoric that was shared by labor advocates and the Democratic press was their sense that economic voter intimidation, by eroding workingmen's independence, erased their very humanity. One witness before a senate investigative committee described in horror how "the men of a railroad company in this city were marched to the polls like cattle and compelled to vote one ticket." Their only true remaining freedom, the witness added, was the "right to close by suicide a miserable existence."³⁸ The *Labor Herald*, the Knights of Labor's newspaper in Richmond, Virginia, offered a similar sentiment in the Spring of 1886. The paper lamented the "SAD spectacle" of "a workingman with a ring in his nose being led up to the polls to vote" against his conscience.³⁹ In 1889 a Democratic newspaper in Maryland argued in favor of ballot secrecy on the grounds that it would prevent "manufacturers and other employers of men" from trying to "coerce and vote them like cattle."⁴⁰ The farmyard imagery of a worker being dragged by his boss to the polls like a cow being tugged to the slaughter was

³⁶ "The Campaign.: Last Call to Freemen in Ohio. Special Dispatch to the *Enquirer*," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 27, 1880, 4.

³⁷ "White Slavery," *The Stark County Democrat* (Canton, OH), October 28, 1880, 1. The New York *Sun* carried three front page articles on coercion on the Sunday before the 1880 election. One called on Union veterans to guard the polls against bribery, colonization, and "the coercion and intimidation of workingmen." The paper reminded the veterans: "Your valor abolished negro slavery. Let your firmness prevent the institution of white slavery by monopolists. Demand a free ballot. "The Veterans who are for Hancock," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 31, 1880, 1. Similar themes recurred in elections throughout the period, see: "Editorial Article 2 — Slaves and Slave-Masters," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 1884, 2, and "Mining Slaves," *St. Paul Daily Globe* (Saint Paul, MN), November 1, 1892, 1.

³⁸ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital* v2 191.

³⁹ "Untitled," *The Labor Herald* (Richmond, VA), May 22, 1886, 2.

⁴⁰ "Sherman's Federal Election Law," *The Democratic Advocate* (Westminster, MD), December 21, 1889, 2.

evocative and discomfiting. It also emphasized the stakes involved for workingmen. If they did not oppose economic voter intimidation, and soon, they stood to lose far more than just their free choice at the polls. Neither slaves nor animals enjoyed political equality.⁴¹

Nationally famous clergyman Lyman Abbot—Henry Ward Beecher's successor as editor of the *Christian Century* magazine—combined many of these rhetorical strands in a November 1885 article.⁴² "Politically America is a democracy; industrially America is an aristocracy," Abbott explained to his large reading audience. While through his possession of the ballot a workingman "*makes* political laws; he is *under* industrial laws" in his workplace. Here Abbott engaged the language of slavery, claiming that, "At the ballot box he is a king; in the factory he is a servant, sometimes a slave."⁴³ Economic voter intimidation threatened to connect the factory to the ballot box, substituting the near-slavery that workingmen suffered under in factory for the sovereignty they enjoyed at the polls. How, Abbot asked, could a society "at the same moment [put] a ballot *into* the hand" of a man and then place "a manacle *upon* it" in the form of precarious wage labor and a lack of education. In Abbott's eyes the solution was simple, "We must either take the ballot out or the manacle off."⁴⁴ Economic voter intimidation made Abbott and many other Americans realize the extent to which universal manhood suffrage and

⁴¹ Comparing coerced voters to farm animals was a popular simile in labor circles and in the Democratic, Populist, and Republican press, for more examples see: "Intimidation of White Voters by Radicals," from the *South Bend Herald* (IN), *Charlotte Democrat* (Charlotte, NC), October 29, 1880, 3, "Ballot Reform as an Educator," From "Topics of the Time," in *The Century Magazine for January*, *The Progressive Farmer* (Winston, NC), June 9, 1891, 3, "The Secret Ballot," *The Progressive Farmer* (Winston, NC), January 5, 1892, 2, and "Kangaroo Ballot for Kansas," *The Enterprise* (Wellington, OH), March 15, 1893, 6.

⁴² Historian Carl Smith superbly documented the bleak economic context in which Abbott wrote, noting that the clergyman's wariness towards unions had been overcome by his greater fear of the "tyrannical capitalists" and others who posed an even greater threat to social order. Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 119, see also notes 35 and 36 and 326-7.

⁴³ Lyman Abbott, "Danger Ahead," *Century* 21, November 1885, 57. Italics in original.

⁴⁴ Lyman Abbott, "Danger Ahead," *Century* 21, November 1885, 57. Italics in original.

unregulated wage labor capitalism were in conflict with each other. So long as employers could exploit their employees' economic dependence for political gain, democracy and industrialization would remain inherently incompatible.

Undermining Manhood

The language of slavery and independence that labor advocates used to describe economic voter intimidation was intertwined with the language of gender. The anonymous author who denounced voter coercion as slavery in the Democratic *Intelligencer* in October 1880 concluded his article by pleading with workingmen to stand up to the employers who threatened the safety of "your wife and little ones" by "show[ing] them that with all their intimidations you are still men, and will act as such." This call to manhood was intended as a plea for workers to vote for their chosen party regardless of the almost certain negative economic consequences. The Gilded Age conception of manhood reified sacrificing comfort or even health to preserve an image of manliness. The *Intelligencer* article invoked the worker's wife and children, "for whose welfare and happiness you toil," to remind workers that they were performing their manhood for an audience and that others were depending on them for survival.⁴⁵

Democratic and Republican newspapers both invoked ideals of manliness in their descriptions of economic voter intimidation, but with different emphasis. Democratic papers generally emphasized that coercion was inherently emasculating for workingmen and would plunge them into servitude. For example, the *Intelligencer* denounced bosses during the 1880

⁴⁵ G.S.L, "Rights of Workingmen," *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer* (Lancaster PA), October 26, 1880, 2.

campaign for telling their workers how to vote. Such coercion was an act that "the manhood of the employed forbids him to obey against his judgment." No matter the consequences to the employed man's life and livelihood, the paper announced that "it is his part" to stand firm against coercion. Mixing race and gender critiques, the paper concluded that if a man did not risk his job to protect his political freedom he proved himself to be nothing more than "a poor slave" unworthy of exercising political independence.⁴⁶ During the same month, the *Stark County Democrat* of Ohio pronounced in the midst of a lengthy description of Republican coercion that "no workingman is worthy [of] the name of freeman" who allowed himself to succumb to coercion. The paper expressed regret that there were "men weak enough" to let their bosses dictate their vote and concluded with the catchy couplet: "He is a freeman whom the Truth makes free; And all are slaves beside."⁴⁷

Throughout the coercion crisis, Democratic papers emphasized the impossible choice that economic voter intimidation forced upon workingmen, and the threat that vulnerability posed to American democracy. The Sunday before the 1880 federal election, the New York *Sun* denounced the coercion of workingmen in three separate front page articles. The longest article described how a superintendent at a Standard Oil facility in Weehawken, New Jersey demanded to know the political leanings of every employee and then fired the two dozen who planned to vote Democratic. The *Sun* explained that for a workingman who considered "the maintenance of

⁴⁶ "The Business Interests," *Lancaster Daily Intelligencer* (Lancaster PA), October 8, 1880, 2.

⁴⁷ "The Election," *Stark County Democrat* (Canton, OH), October 14, 1880, 4. One Democratic paper described a case from the 1876 election in which a New York manufacturing company coerced its to vote for Hayes. Only one man, the paper explained, "had the manliness to tell the officious superintendent that his principles would not permit him to vote that ticket... the manly and frank reply should have commanded the respect of his employer," but instead he was discharged. "Northern 'Bulldozing'," *The Weekly Advertiser* (Montgomery, AL), December 4, 1876, 2.

his family of paramount importance," the implicit threat from a "man on whose favor depended his daily bread" was not one he could ignore. Workingmen's economic precariousness, the paper argued, had left them vulnerable to coercion which in turn undermined their suffrage rights. One of the discharged workingmen explained to the *Sun's* reporter that he had been paid little for his work, but had assumed that his independence and manhood would still secure his vote. He had believed that "a poor devil who's obliged to work for such wages as that might at least have a right to vote as he pleased." He was wrong.⁴⁸

Republican papers reversed the connection that their opponents made between economic voter intimidation and manhood. The true crime against American manliness was not, Republican papers explained, that employers were coercing their employees; it was that workingmen were insufficiently manly to stand up for themselves against intimidation. If what Democratic papers, voters, and politicians alleged about economic coercion was true, then, as an Ohio Republican paper put it in 1888, "a man who allows such an interference isn't much of a man."⁴⁹ This common Republican perspective held that buckling to coercion was evidence of a voter's insufficient manhood. "No honest upright, free born and self-respecting man," a Delaware Republican paper alleged in 1889, "would subject himself to the ignominy of having his exercise of the right of suffrage tampered with" by his employer.⁵⁰ This narrative could buttress Republican claims that economic intimidation was not a real problem, because no man would

⁴⁸ "Bulldozing For Garfield," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 31, 1880, 1. A decade later the *New York Times* expressed sympathy in similar language for workingmen who were told that their ability to "earn daily bread for himself and his wife and children depends upon voting" as his employer demanded. Even for a manly workingman such pressures were "very hard to resist." "The American Workman," *New York Times*, March 12, 1890, 4.

⁴⁹ "Untitled," *Springfield Daily Republic* (Springfield, OH), April 7, 1888, 4.

⁵⁰ "Who Furnishes the Money," *Evening Journal* (Wilmington, DE), December 18, 1889, 2.

tolerate such a usurpation of his manhood. But it could also be deployed as evidence that workingmen were not sufficiently manly to be trusted to vote, and so the loss of their freedom of political choice was a net positive for the nation. Their bosses would cast their votes more thoughtfully than they ever could.

Because independence and manhood were inextricable from each other in defining "first citizen" status within the nineteenth century's borders of belonging, advocates against coercion frequently invoked these concepts together. In the midst of the Knights of Labor's peak in 1886, *The Labor Herald* re-published an article from one of its affiliates, the *Valley Virginian*, that linked these concepts to the rising Democratic Party's campaign of intimidation. Opposing economic voter intimidation, the paper claimed, was a critical part of the Knights of Labor's broader campaign to empower "laboring men of all classes [to assert] their manhood and independence." The article repeated this formulation several times, concluding that coercion had awakened the "self-respect and manhood independence" of the laboring classes. Thus the article had it both ways, coercion threatened manhood and independence but also reactivated those individual rights among men who had let such vital concerns atrophy when they became industrial laborers.⁵¹

⁵¹ This article in the Knights of Labor's official paper claimed, self-servingly, that the prevalence of economic intimidation validated the existence of labor unions. Because coercion posed an existential threat to the manhood and independence of laboring men it was "perfectly legitimate," the paper proposed, for workers to "unite" in a union that would oppose such intimidations. Noting that "there is not a town or county in the state" where laborers had not faced economic intimidation at the polls, it concluded that labor must "manifest its manhood" by standing against coercive employers to regain the respect and privileges naturally due to white, able-bodied, men. While framing the formation of a labor union as the solution to worker coercion had the potential to benefit the Knights of Labor directly, considering the existential threat to manliness and independence that coercion seemed to pose to laborers, unifying in opposition was a reasonable proposal. "Boycotting," from *Valley Virginian*, in *The Labor Herald* (Richmond, VA), March 13, 1886, 1.

Even incarcerated men valued independent manhood and viewed economic voter intimidation as a profound threat to workingmen's ability to stand as full citizens. In the spring of 1891 a reporter for the New York *Sun* sat in on a practical ethics course in the Elmira Reformatory. According to the *Sun's* account, one of the prisoners asked Professor James R. Monks "as to the culpability of a voter who yields to the dictation of his employer as to how he shall cast his ballot." The prisoner who asked the question did not think "a man should be blamed for sacrificing his political opinion to keep his place of employment," but he was curious about what the Professor Monks and the rest of the class thought about it. Monks was thrilled. After all, Monks explained, "there was doubtless a great deal of undue influence exerted by employers over those who were dependent upon them for their bread and butter." As any good instructor in a discussion setting would, the professor noted that "there were several standpoints from which the matter might be viewed. What did the class think about it?"⁵²

One prisoner maintained that "yielding to such dictation was only another form of selling one's vote." Yet, while the prisoner viewed selling a vote as a vile transaction, Monks waded in to remark provocatively that "he had often seen people who looked upon a vote as a marketable commodity just as cabbages and potatoes were." No one seems to have taken the bait. Instead, several prisoners voiced their support for "men who had a choice between voting as their employers said and being turned out." After all, as they sadly noted, "what else could a man do?" Long experience in a precarious labor market and constant subjection to autocratic authority figures had perhaps impressed upon these prisoners the hopelessness of opposing entrenched

⁵² "Where Crime is Cured," *The Sun* (New York, NY), May 17, 1891, 27.

power. Several prisoners objected strongly to this line of reasoning, however. Had an employer threatened his vote, he would have defied him and certainly "would display more manhood to vote as they felt and accept the alternative." A true man would prefer to sacrifice his own and his family's economic security rather than giving up their own assertion of political equality. When the situation was reduced to a question of intimidation threatening their manhood, even those prisoners who had wondered what else a man could do in the face of a discharge threat suddenly switched their opinion. Professor Monks closed the debate and called for a vote on the issue. The prisoners voted to assert their manhood and oppose any employer who sought to coerce their vote, no matter the consequences.⁵³ As the *New York Times* had explained just a year prior, "the first condition of intelligent citizenship is independence."⁵⁴ For prisoners and workingmen alike, defending their manhood was akin to defending their independence, and their independence was inextricable from their self-conception as citizens.

The Ballot and the Fear of Revolutionary Violence

If workingmen's economic precariousness could undermine their status as independent citizens, then it also potentially posed a threat to the stability of the American government and economy. Politicians, labor advocates, and ordinary workingmen were terrified that workingmen's precariousness and poverty in the 1870s and 1880s would lead to unrest and possibly violence. The damage that an unhappy and desperate working class might wreak on American capitalism if they chose to express themselves violently rather than politically terrified

⁵³ "Where Crime is Cured," *The Sun* (New York, NY), May 17, 1891, 27.

⁵⁴ "The American Workman," *New York Times*, March 12, 1890, 4.

Americans across the political spectrum. Even a publication as seemingly remote from labor concerns as *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health* worried in December 1874 that "classes formidable in numbers... are waking up to the fact that they are overworked and under-paid."⁵⁵ Conditions did not improve. In 1883 the newspaper of the trades union council of New Haven, Connecticut deplored how in the midst of national progress its members were driven into poverty as a natural consequence of "our capitalistic, monopolistic mode of production." It was all workingmen could do to clothe and feed themselves, the union paper claimed, they could not even think of aspiring beyond those base needs to "the dignity of true manhood."⁵⁶ In 1888 a four-part feature series on factory life in *The Atlantic Monthly* noted that "the laborer of to-day is hung between heaven and earth in the social atmosphere, his feet on nothing" while his employers accumulated "dangerously autocratic power" in the factory and beyond.⁵⁷

Organized labor had embraced the ballot and peaceful political reform during the violent strike wave in 1877 during the depth of the depression. Most notably, labor leaders did so in response to the attempt by New York City's business community to deprive non-taxpayers of the vote on municipal issues. After successfully defending their political rights in that struggle, however, labor advocates throughout the nation began to doubt the power of the ballot to effect reform. As elections failed to produce desperately needed relief for precarious workers, labor leaders, politicians, and reform advocates began to worry desperate men would abandon the

⁵⁵ "The Labor Problem: Its Present and its Future," *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health* December 1874, 377.

⁵⁶ "Untitled," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), September 8, 1883, 1.

⁵⁷ Lillie B. Chace Wyman, "Studies of Factory Life: The Village System: The first installment in a four-part series on American cotton manufacturing," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1888 Issue, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1888/07/studies-of-factory-life-the-village-system/523149/>.

ballot for the bullet.⁵⁸ In *The Atlantic Monthly's* July 1886 issue, English-born journalist George Frederic Parsons noted with concern the decline of workingmen's trust in democracy. Due to the "short-sighted rapacity and selfishness" of capital that had produced decades of precarity, ordinary workers had generally lost their belief "in the popular ability to obtain, through the ballot, whatever is worth having." In their disgust with the failures of the ballot, Parsons warned, labor leaders were increasingly turning to socialism and threatened to reenact the recent revolutionary violence of the 1871 Paris Commune.⁵⁹ But the widespread existence of economic voter intimidation confronted Americans who advocated peaceful reform through the ballot with a desperate conundrum. Was the ballot capable of serving as an effective social pressure release valve when the very voters who needed to see it as a legitimate political tool were being coerced to vote against their interests by their bosses?

Henry George sought to remind the leaders of organized labor that the ballot, however imperfect, was the only political tool they possessed. In a letter to the Conference of Labor Associations in late August of 1886, George explained that it was "both the right and the duty of workingmen to turn to political action for the redress of grievances." George explicitly endorsed politics over violence, noting that though there may be excuses "for violence in countries where aristocratic political institutions yet exist," in the United States, "where manhood suffrage prevails," violence was a wholly unacceptable form of labor advocacy. George worried that the labor leaders he addressed would forget that "the ballot is the proper means of protest." He did

⁵⁸ David Quigley, *Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 154-160.

⁵⁹ George Frederic Parsons, "The Labor Question," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1886 Issue, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1886/07/the-labor-question/522606/>.

not deny the dire situation of labor, noting that without proper reforms "social disaster" was inevitable. He was adamant, however, that it was through the ballot, "the only instrument of reform" acceptable in a free society, that such changes must be made. George's call for laboring men to use the ballot regardless of its imperfections in the summer of 1886 was a substantial departure from his then-fifteen year-long argument that without the protection of compulsory secrecy, the American ballot was corrupt and dangerous. His change in tone is perhaps explained by the fact that George himself was going to be on the ballot in 1886 as the reform candidate for mayor of New York City.⁶⁰

While George expressed supreme faith in the ballot, workingmen and labor leaders voiced concern that because of economic voter intimidation, the working classes had begun to view their ballots as corrupt or worthless. With wages low and work precarious, an anonymous workingman in New York in 1883 explained to a senate investigative committee, "our only equality is our *ballot*."⁶¹ Yet that equality was fast disappearing. A witness representing the Central Labor Union of New York named Edward King warned the senators that workingmen were growing tired of failed reforms and advocacy and an angry worker might reasonably turn to "accomplish his ends by other means."⁶² Senator Wilkinson Call (D-FL), immediately interrupted King's warning, declaring, "Oh, we have provided the ballot to remedy that."⁶³

Robert Blissert, another representative of the Central Labor Union and former secretary of the

⁶⁰ Henry George, "Letter to the Conference of Labor Associations," August 26, 1886, NYPL Henry George Papers, 6.

⁶¹ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v1*, 388. Italics in original.

⁶² *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v1*, 561.

⁶³ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v1*, 700-1.

Workingmen's Union, directly challenged Senator Call's claim in his testimony a few minutes late. "The working people," Blissert explained, "have lost faith in the ballot."⁶⁴ Senator Blair stepped in, asking Blissert if he had "given up all hope of the ballot?" No, Blissert replied, he still strongly believed in the power of the ballot to enact meaningful social change. Most workingmen, however, felt differently, and he was "simply voicing the opinions of the workingmen" who would "naturally turn to other means" if their faith in the ballot was not restored.⁶⁵ The threat inherent in Blissert's remarks was not lost on the senators. If the social pressure release valve that was the ballot was sufficiently corroded by corruption, the buildup of social pressure and resulting explosion could threaten the very foundations of American democracy and capitalism.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v1*, 860. For more on Blissert and his relationship to Henry George see Edward T. O'Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 111, 129, 138.

⁶⁵ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital v1*, 861.

⁶⁶ Despite the dismissive hearing he received before the senators in 1883, Blissert's belief in the importance of ballot reform to stave off devastation only increased in the years to come. Blissert was born in England, where he worked as a tailor, coal miner, cotton factory worker, and labor leader, and supported John Stuart Mill for Parliament. After his arrival to the United States in the late 1860s he continued his involvement in labor causes and eventually came to consider himself a socialist. A few years after his appearance before the senate committee he memorably denounced a state senator as a "liar" for declaring that "the workmen of New York are not in favor of ballot reform" and then insisted that the Central Labor Union dispatch a formal message to the state senate with his insult to insure the man heard him. His bad temper was perhaps explicable by the fact that in the six years since he told the US Senate that the labor movement was at risk of slipping into violence if the ballot was not better protected, the federal government had taken no action to address the crisis. "Organized Labor," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), March 22, 1890, 4. Blissert seemed to delight in sending angry letters to people or organizations he judged as insufficiently attentive to labor issues. A week after his outburst to the state senator, Blissert dismissed Greenbackism in a letter to the editor as "crudeness, superficiality... mere quackery," and called for "the nationalization of the land and the instruments of production." Blissert was not concerned at how radical his proposal might have appeared. "Call this Socialism, if you like, or Nationalism," Blissert announced, "I am not a ninny (most of us in New York are no ninnies); we are not afraid of a name. we know what we want." "Organized Labor," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), March 22, 1890, 4.

Labor advocacy grew more confrontational during the 1880s, and industrialists and state and federal officials responded with violence and overwhelming force. With workingmen dying from hunger and Pinkerton bullets, fewer and fewer Americans believed that the ballot could secure meaningful reform. The execution, in November 1887, of the alleged Haymarket Square bombers, who had become heroes to the labor cause, served as a particularly strong catalyst for violent and explicitly anti-ballot rhetoric. A mass meeting held in Boston to denounce the executions produced an emotional scene as speakers competed with each other to express their rage and frustration. A speaker named Carl Friede called upon the rowdy crowd to remember the Second Amendment: "Our forefathers said that every man should have the right to bear arms." With that reminder ringing in their ears Friede denounced peaceful reform in general and voting in particular, proclaiming to his audience that "you never will achieve your rights by the ballot." The rush to judgment and execution of the Haymarket martyrs was a painful demonstration to workingmen that, as Friede proclaimed, "the ballot has no power." Explicit in this call to violence was the assertion that voting could not provide labor with a real pathway for reform or protection from arbitrary abuses of autocratic power.⁶⁷

In the midst of economic insecurity and violent repression, the belief that violence was a more reliable tool than the ballot was far from marginal in labor circles. The *Workmen's Advocate*, the Connecticut paper that re-printed Friede's denunciation of the ballot on its front page, was the official journal of the Socialistic Labor Party, a predominantly German political organization that advocated for explicitly socialist ideas and ran quixotic candidates in races all

⁶⁷ "Boston: Solemn Tribute to the Martyred Heroes of Chicago," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), November 19, 1887, 1.

across the nation. Just eleven months earlier the *Advocate* had proudly announced that the true socialist "hails with joy the growing enlightenment of his fellow-workers, which leads them to intelligently use the ballot, their only available weapon, against their oppressors."⁶⁸ Now, in the aftermath of what seemed to be a colossal injustice that the ballot could do nothing to prevent, the *Advocate* seemingly endorsed Friede's denigration of the ballot's power, noting that he gave a "strong speech and his words were appreciated by the people."⁶⁹ New York labor advocate Dr. Edward McGlynn expressed his concern the following year that there would be "a dangerous explosion some day" unless workingmen were convinced that their ballots could enact real change.⁷⁰

The stakes of the struggle over economic intimidation at the polls were perhaps most eloquently expressed by James H. Blood. A well regarded Union colonel during the Civil War, Blood led an interesting life after the war, serving as City Auditor of St. Louis, Missouri, before marrying suffragist Victoria Woodhull, generally considered the first woman to run for President. Though the couple divorced in 1876, Blood's devotion to suffrage reform had not diminished by late 1883 when he wrote to a senate investigative committee to express his concern that "the natural order of industrial development" had undermined the ability of workers to make "necessary reforms... through the means already provided; that is, the ballot." While using their political rights to advocate reform was workingmen's first choice, coercion by their employers

⁶⁸ "Prospective," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), January 1, 1887, 2.

⁶⁹ "Boston: Solemn Tribute to the Martyred Heroes of Chicago," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), November 19, 1887, 1.

⁷⁰ "Abuses Of The Ballot: Hearing Before The Governor On The Electoral Reform Bill," telegraph to the *Tribune*, *New-York Tribune*, May 26, 1888, 2.

was rapidly eroding that option. As Blood explained to the committee, workers were aware that their opportunities to improve their economic and social standing through legal political avenues "are becoming fewer year by year as corporations acquire more and more the control of the votes of their employees." Blood hoped that "despite the intimidation to which they will be subjected," workers would unify to "assert their interests" peaceably. But he left no doubt as to the strength of the forces opposing laboring men. The more votes employers captured, the more difficult reform would become.⁷¹

Concerned citizens like James Blood joined a chorus of union leaders and reform advocates who testified before investigative committees and in contested congressional election cases that coercion was undermining workingmen's political rights and posed a serious threat to national stability. Isaac Cohen, an unemployed machinist and president of the Workingmen's Relief Association of the District of Columbia testified to a congressional committee in late 1878 about the false promise of the ballot. "The workingmen are told to assert their rights through the ballot-box. How, if they vote for a certain man and he is counted out? How, if they vote for a man they believe to be honest and he proves dishonest? How, if they are threatened to be discharged if they vote for a man of their choice?"⁷² During a Minnesota contested congressional election that same year, William Krech, a Minneapolis teacher, judge of election, and member of the Workingmen's Union expressed his concern that "If one man is dependent on another can't that other man take advantage of this man's dependence on him?" Breech worried that if

⁷¹ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital* v2, 1387.

⁷² U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of the General Depression in Labor and Business, etc.* 45th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 29, 433.

employers took advantage of their employees' dependence to shape elections on a regular and widespread basis, then perhaps manhood suffrage and wage labor were incompatible. "A class of hired workingmen," he argued was as dangerous an element of society "as an army of hired soldiers" if their votes could be coerced.⁷³

In New York, a grocer concerned about monopoly power told a senate investigative committee that corporations operated with near total impunity to control elections. Their political influence, purchased by thousands of bribed or coerced votes, meant that even when their offenses were discovered they "cannot be punished."⁷⁴ The editorial and news pages of labor newspapers were awash in calls for laborers to fight back against the threat of undue influence by corporations.⁷⁵ The crisis rapidly made its way into the party platforms of radical leftist parties, including the Socialistic Labor Party, which expressed concern in its platforms throughout the 1880s that inequalities in industrial life could "destroy liberty because the economical subjection of the wage-workers to the owners of the means of production leads immediately to their political dependence upon the same sources."⁷⁶ Workers and politicians alike were convinced that because economic voter intimidation undermined the independence of American workingmen, it posed a severe threat to American democracy.

⁷³ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Report in the Case of Ignatius Donnelly vs. William D. Washburn Contested Election*, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1880, Report No. 1791, 171-3.

⁷⁴ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital* v2, 745.

⁷⁵ *The Labor Herald* editorialized constantly on corporations in politics and noted in 1886 that "if vigilance to preserve the liberties of a country was ever needed it is needed now. Let us not despair, but act. There are yet such things as votes and ballot-boxes in this country." "Untitled," *The Labor Herald* (Richmond, VA), April 24, 1886, 1.

⁷⁶ Platform und Constitution der Soz. Arbeiter-Partei angenommen auf der 5ten. National-Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, am 5., 6., 7. und 8. October 1885. Socialistic Library no. 1, January 1, 1886 (New York: National Executive Committee of the Socialistic Labor Party, 1886).

In the very same issue of the *Workmen's Advocate* that carried Friede's speech calling for violence in response to the Haymarket executions, the official journal of the Socialistic Labor Party offered a compromise solution between abandoning or embracing the ballot: reforming it to provide protection against intimidation. The paper called for the national enactment of "A Secret Ballot System" which "effectively prevents the influencing of voters at the polls." In the midst of a national upheaval of laborers that threatened to unleash civil war and destroy democracy itself, the one reform that the Socialistic Labor Party called for was the protection of voters at the polls from intimidation through secrecy. If workingmen could provide the motive force behind the enactment of a secret ballot law, the *Advocate* claimed, it would "rally all true and upright men" to their cause, and would do far more to shatter the "shackles of wage-slavery" than could any number of guns or bombs.⁷⁷ In 1884 progressive economist Richard T. Ely argued that economic voter intimidation had shaped the political ideology of the Socialistic Labor Party. The party, he explained, wanted to fight for both economic and political equality, but before either could be accomplished, Americans would have to overcome the "fact that economic servitude renders political equality a deceit...since those who control the means of life control the votes." By the mid-1880s, ending employers' control of their employees' votes through the provision of ballot secrecy became a core aim of labor, socialist, and liberal reform organizations.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Labor Politics," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), November 19, 1887.

⁷⁸ Richard T. Ely, *Recent American Socialism* (Baltimore: N. Murray, Publication Agent, Johns Hopkins University, 1884), 281. Terence Powderly of the Knights of Labor echoed this theme. In a major address at New York City's Cooper Union in 1890, Powderly argued that if economic and political conditions continued to deteriorate the rich would own everything or workingmen would inaugurate "a revolution as would shake the country." The only way to prevent either eventuality, Powderly declared, was through the creation of a secret ballot. "Ballot Reform Their Cry.: Enthusiastic Meeting of Knights of Labor," *New York Times*, March 11, 1890, 5.

Conclusion

The "labor problem" of the late nineteenth century threatened to undermine the socially and politically privileged standing of white workingmen in society. Economically precarious men like the Boston rower Michael Enwright were perhaps resigned to their economic inequality, but they were vigorous in their defense of their standing "upon the plane of political equality."⁷⁹ Economic voter intimidation robbed workingmen of their vote and, if they tried to stand up for what they viewed as their rights, often cost them and their families economic security in tough times. For men who were already worried about how the new logics of the industrial economy were reshaping American society, coercion threatened to do far more damage. Coercion undermined the ability of workingmen to provide for their families and cast them as helpless victims in a system they had no control over. It made painfully apparent their lack of independence and called into question both their manhood and their whiteness. Reformers like Henry George and labor and leftist organizations like the Knights of Labor and Socialistic Labor Party viewed these coercive pressures as existential threats. If workers could not be trusted to cast ballots based on their own beliefs and loyalties, they could never be counted on as equal citizens.

At stake in the struggle against economic voter intimidation was the ability of economically precarious white workingmen to protect their "electoral privilege," which legal scholar George E. Hill described in 1891 as "the most distinctive badge of their political

⁷⁹ *1885 Senate Investigation—Labor and Capital* v3, 398.

equality." The demand of the working classes for ballot secrecy was a response, Hill claimed, to the invasion of their individual rights "by the intimidation of employers." These men wanted secrecy at the polls so they could elect politicians who would faithfully represent their concerns and issues in government. But they also demanded ballot secrecy because they believed that casting a ballot was in and of itself a gesture of "individual independence" that employer coercion had fatally undermined.⁸⁰

While some politicians believed that workingmen's possession of the ballot offered a potent remedy for the problems afflicting their class, labor and reform advocates argued with increasing anger in the 1870s and 80s that the economic intimidation of voters had corrupted the promise of the ballot by extending the autocratic, feudalistic, illiberal management ethos of the workplace into the polling place, the ostensible bastion of political equality. Reform, labor, and leftist advocates pushed politicians not only to acknowledge the danger that coercion posed to democracy, but also to offer real protection for workers in the form of ballot secrecy. Protecting working class voters at the polls would also diminish the prospect of violent revolution by restoring democracy's legitimacy. The discourse surrounding economic voter intimidation and its threat to American democracy was national in scope. It tapped into new fears about industrial change and universal suffrage and concerns older than the Constitution regarding the centrality of the voice of the people in government and the definition of who the people were. Labor and leftist leaders played a key role in this conversation.

⁸⁰ George E. Hill, "Secret Ballot," *Yale Law Journal*, no. 1 (1891): 26-29, 27.

Chapter Five: "For the Sake of His Vote:" Labor Proposes the Secret Ballot Solution

To solve the coercion crisis and save American democracy, labor leaders and leftist politicians advocated for ballot secrecy. To an extent and with an impact that historians and political scientists have not acknowledged, labor and socialist leaders fought for ballot secrecy specifically to counteract economic voter intimidation.¹ Henry George was again a critical figure in this struggle. His early advocacy of the secret ballot has been noted by historians, but the fact that he was motivated to call for its enactment by his fear of economic voter intimidation has not.² Nor has the advocacy of labor organizations and socialist political parties which pushed ballot secrecy into the political mainstream. Far from viewing the secret ballot as a limitation on the suffrage, reformers like George and labor leaders like Knights of Labor General Master Workman Terence Powderly saw it as a way to restore the free and untrammelled ballot to a particularly vulnerable swathe of American citizens. This chapter explores the arguments of labor and leftist advocates in favor of ballot secrecy nationwide and demonstrates that their efforts presaged those of mainstream reformers and politicians.

Historians have typically emphasized how the secret ballot as it was applied in the United States could weed out economically, racially, or educationally undesirable voters while, at best,

¹ This section of the chapter engages with an ongoing effort by historians and political scientists to explain the motives and ideologies that drove the enactment of ballot secrecy laws is necessary. As political scientists Didi Kuo and Jan Teorell explained, "The exact motive behind this reform has been debated and varies across states and regions." Economic voter intimidation, while mentioned as a subsidiary motivation in many studies, has not been thoroughly assessed thus far. Didi Kuo and Jan Teorell, "Illicit Tactics as Substitutes: Election Fraud, Ballot Reform, and Contested Congressional Elections in the United States, 1860-1930," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 5 (April 2017): 665–96, 669. See also Jac C. Heckelman's 1994 dissertation on the secret ballot which argued that "there is no consensus as to why these laws were enacted." Jac C. Heckelman, "The Secret Ballot and the Market For Votes: Economic Incentives Of A Secret Ballot," (Ph.D. Diss., University of Maryland, 1994), 47.

² Sarah M. Henry, "Progressivism and Democracy: Electoral Reform in the United States, 1888-1919," (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 1995), 40.

preventing bribery and limiting some forms of fraud.³ Intellectual historian Nancy Cohen argued that liberal intellectuals such as Henry Adams and E.L. Godkin viewed the secret ballot as a way to "limit political participation to the qualified."⁴ Even when scholars acknowledged that reformers also intended to improve elections standards, they have all too often emphasized its effect on bribery over coercion. A 2002 article by two economists on the adoption of the secret ballot and its effect on incumbency mentioned coercion occasionally but described it as merely an element in a "vote market" along with bribery. While the market forces of vote buying were readily apparent to these scholars, the coercive mechanics of economic voter intimidation were seemingly unimportant.⁵ The omission of coercion from the story of the secret ballot is all the more remarkable considering that Arthur Wallace, who wrote the first compulsory secret ballot law enacted in the nation in 1888, bragged that the new law, which applied only to the city of

³ The regressive power of the secret ballot was not to be denied. For example, Richard Valelly quotes the secretary of state of Arkansas in 1896 who exulted that the secret ballot's enactment had "minimized the pernicious and demoralizing effects of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution." Richard M. Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement*. American Politics and Political Economy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 127.

⁴ Nancy Cohen, *Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 55, 215, 228. See also Edward H. Miller, "They Vote Only for the Spoils: Massachusetts Reformers, Suffrage Restriction, and the 1884 Civil Service Law," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8, no. 3 (2009): 341-63; J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-party South, 1880-1910* (Yale Historical Publications. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Tracy Campbell, "Machine Politics, Police Corruption, and the Persistence of Vote Fraud: The Case of the Louisville, Kentucky, Election of 1905." *Journal of Policy History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 269-300, Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 115.

⁵ While the word coercion appears in the article three times, bribery or bribe made 49 appearances. Jac C. Heckelman, Andrew J. Yates, "Incumbency preservation through electoral legislation: The case of the secret ballot," *Economics of Governance* (2002) 3: 47-57, 47. For another example of an otherwise excellent article on voting in the Gilded Age emphasizing bribery rather than intimidation as the proximate cause of the introduction of ballot secrecy see: John F. Reynolds, and Richard L. McCormick, "Outlawing 'Treachery': Split Tickets and Ballot Laws in New York and New Jersey, 1880-1910," *The Journal of American History* 72, no. 4 (1986): 835-58.

Louisville, Kentucky, "frees the voter from intimidation through his business, political or social connections."⁶

Historian Lionel E. Fredman's essential book on the American adoption of ballot secrecy did give credit to labor advocates and leftist political parties for fighting for ballot secrecy to halt the common practice in "the burgeoning factories... for employers to coerce the votes of their workingmen."⁷ Fredman even lauded Terence Powderly as "one of many forgotten agitators for the Australian ballot reform."⁸ When it came time to assess final responsibility for the success of the secret ballot in the United States, however, Fredman argued that "the most important contribution was made by the Mugwumps and Single Taxers," particularly in critical early fights in New York and Massachusetts.⁹

This scholarly consensus missed the labor advocates, reform leaders, and socialist politicians who fought for ballot secrecy specifically to protect workingmen from economic voter intimidation. Because they perceived this form of coercion as an existential threat to universal (white) male suffrage, they sought out a form of protection that could break the chain of information between an employer, his employee, and that employee's ballot. Labor organizations such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor made ballot

⁶ Quoted in Abram C. Bernheim, "The Ballot in New York," *Political Science Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1889): 130-52, 142.

⁷ Lionel E. Fredman, *The Australian Ballot: The Story of an American Reform* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968), 62-3.

⁸ Fredman, *The Australian Ballot*, 63.

⁹ Fredman, *The Australian Ballot*, 64. The Mugwumps whom Fredman referred to were a group of mostly wealthy liberal "high-minded" reformers who were important predecessors to the Progressive movement, including men like the impeccably credentialed Richard Henry Dana III who wrote the Massachusetts secret ballot law. Fredman correctly distinguished George and his followers from the broad category of "Labor." Single Taxers did not agree with labor leaders on all issues, but the secret ballot was one on which there was general consensus between the two often divergent causes. Fredman, *The Australian Ballot*, ix.

secrecy a core political demand of their movements earlier and with more force than did mugwumps and moderate reformers. Labor and socialist third parties including the Greenback-Labor Party, the United Labor Party, and the Socialistic Labor Party included ballot secrecy in their platforms and advocated for it in their newspapers. From Henry George's early advocacy in the 1870s, the idea of the secret ballot in the United States grew under the pressure and prodding of labor unions and leftist political organizations in reaction to the widespread perception of a crisis of coercion. Secret ballot advocacy reached critical mass between 1888-1891, when a majority of states enacted protections reminiscent of the Australian System that George first described in the United States more than twenty years before.

George and the Giant Ballot Problem

When states in the United States began introducing the secret ballot in 1888, they were following in the footsteps of most of the rest of the English-speaking world. The modern form of ballot secrecy that predominates around the world today was invented in the British colony of Australia in the 1850s. The reform then traveled to the metropole where the United Kingdom enacted a secret ballot law closely resembling the Australian system.¹⁰ While the British secret ballot did not block all sources of corruption, it did succeed in greatly diminishing disorder at the polls, direct bribery, and most of all, the "open intimidation of tenants and workingmen" which

¹⁰ The Parliamentary debate over the law touched on some of the same themes of race and independence that economic voter intimidation prompted in the United States. The journal *The Spectator* acknowledged the need for ballot secrecy but denounced it as "a brutally clumsy and rude device," that would perhaps serve as an understandable protection for "people just emancipated from slavery and at heart afraid of the whip." For true Englishmen, however, *The Spectator* saw the ballot was an insult. Despite the insult, ballot secrecy became the law of the land in Britain in 1872. "The Ballot," from *The Spectator* (London, UK), in *Littell's Living Age*, March 25, 1871; 1399, 823.

had plagued British elections for decades.¹¹ Fredman wrote that "one of the commonest facts of British elections before 1872" had been the sight of "landlords intimidat[ing] their tenants, and march[ing] detachments to the polls."¹² Ballot secrecy brought that practice to an end.

In the United States, economic voter intimidation was a factor in the discourse surrounding ballot secrecy from the very beginning. At the same time that the British Parliament was debating the enactment of a secret ballot law, a familiar figure opened the discussion in the former colony. In the December 1871 issue of the *Overland Monthly* magazine, Henry George, living in relative obscurity in California, became the first American to explicitly advocate in print for the enactment of the Australian ballot.¹³ Though he was still eight years away from *Progress and Poverty* and international fame, George was a perceptive observer of American politics and economics. In a brief article he laid out the advantages of secrecy at the polls and explained how the Australian method worked. While he devoted much of his argument to how ballot secrecy could halt the crime of bribery, he saved his strongest argument for an

¹¹ Fredman, *The Australian Ballot*, 17. Economic voter intimidation did not disappear entirely in British elections. In 1885 the *Sun* reported that in recent British elections "times have for a long time past been unusually hard," and that because of their precariousness poor voters were "under more than ordinary obligations to their employers and patrons... They have also issued circulars among the farm laborers declaring that the character of their ballots will inevitably be known to their employers." "Latest News From Europe," *The Sun* (New York, NY), July 5, 1885, 1. For more on election law in the United Kingdom see: Miles Walker Mattinson and Stuart Cunningham Macaskie, *The Law Relating to Corrupt Practices at Elections and the Practice on Election Petitions* (London: Waterlow and Sons Limited, London Wall, E.C., 1883).

¹² John H. Wigmore, *The Australian Ballot System as Embodied in the Legislation of Various Countries, With an Historical Introduction* (Boston: Charles C. Soule, 1889), 12. Observers noted that the secret ballot had a greater impact halting that form of intimidation than it did on bribery and corruption, necessitating the passage of a corrupt practices act in 1883 that sought to control campaign expenses. "The New Method of Voting," *The Andover Review; a Religious and Theological Monthly* (Boston, MA), Vol. 11, Iss. 63, March 1889, 299.

¹³ Fredman, *The Australian Ballot*, 32. The staunchly Democratic *Boston Daily Globe* noted in 1889 that "The First advocate of the system in America was Henry George, who is surely not much of a Republican." Of course George was not much of a Democrat either. "A Democratic Measure," *Boston Daily Globe*, November 11, 1889, 4.

issue which had not attracted much public attention as of yet. Not only would the Australian ballot end bribery, George argued, it would also bring to an end "another form of election corruption, which is even worse and more demoralizing than bribery—the coercion of voters by their employers."¹⁴ Years before politicians and labor advocates began to treat economic voter intimidation as a crisis, George had diagnosed the problem and offered a solution.



Figure 5.1: A depiction of the Australian Ballot system at work in Massachusetts, the first US state to enact a statewide secret ballot law. Note the police officers keeping watch both inside and a respectable distance outside the polling place.¹⁵

¹⁴ Henry George, "Bribery in Elections," *Overland Monthly* (San Francisco, CA), v.7, December 1871, 500.

¹⁵ "Massachusetts.—The Australian Ballot System in Boston.—The Method of Voting, the Form of Ticket, Etc. From Sketches by G. Upham," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), November 23, 1889, 277.

George's 1871 call for a secret ballot and his concern about economic voter intimidation largely fell on deaf ears. As he noted in the article, the critical driver of political reform was public opinion. "When the people really and strongly desire reform, they will get it, but not till then."¹⁶ The threat that coercion posed to a nation trying to balance universal male suffrage with mass industrialization had not yet become apparent to most Americans when George offered his first warning. As a Massachusetts legislator explained, it was only after the Panic of 1873 brought "economic questions... to the front" that it began to seem important to protect workingmen from intimidation at the polls.¹⁷ After the perpetual precarity of labor became a central concern of American political discourse in the mid-1870s, people began to demand reform, just as George predicted, and the type of reform that they requested was exactly that which he had offered in 1871.

Ordinary workingmen who experienced economic intimidation directly were quick to understand the threat that their bosses' control of their votes posed to their political equality. On their own initiative, many workingmen began to articulate both George's diagnosis of the problem of workplace coercion and his favored solution. In 1880, the House Committee on Elections noted that workingmen in Minnesota had identified the ability of observers to tell who voters cast their ballots for as the critical "means by which their employers could intimidate them." Despite their testimony explicitly naming what their bosses were doing as intimidation, the Committee persisted in describing it as part of "a cloud of bribery" that pervaded the election.

¹⁶ George, "Bribery in Elections," 500.

¹⁷ "The New Method Of Voting," *The Andover Review; a Religious and Theological Monthly* (Boston, MA), Vol. 11, Iss. 63, March 1889, 299.

The Committee also rejected the witnesses' concern that their employers would use their knowledge of the content of their ballots for "the purpose of intimidation."¹⁸ The workingmen who testified in that case, and in many others in the 1880s, however, were increasingly certain that the open ballot was a vector for employer intimidation. The only solution was compulsory ballot secrecy.

Powderly and the Knights

One of the earliest and most vocal supporters of ballot secrecy within the labor ranks was Terence Powderly, the General Master Workman of the Knights of Labor. Powderly had a deeper and more personal connection to the issue of ballot secrecy than any other labor leader. According to his autobiography, Powderly cast his first ballot when he was just seven years old. It was 1856 and he thought it was wrong that his abolitionist mother was not allowed to vote while his father got to vote for James Buchanan. To rectify the injustice, young Powderly went with his father to the polls, grabbed a Republican ticket and, with the help of a friendly bystander who lifted him up to the window, proudly placed his ballot into the sacred box. As was fairly traditional in the mid-nineteenth century, the ballot box was located in the lobby of a hotel, and the son of the proprietor, a boy "three years older... and four sizes bigger" than Powderly was able to witness his vote. As Powderly walked triumphantly home the older boy followed him and administered some "forceful but not convincing" political persuasion with his fists for having

¹⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Chester H. Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest of all the Contested Elections in the House of Representatives of the United States from the First to the Fifty-sixth Congress, 1789-1901*, 56th Cong., 2d Sess., 1901, Doc. No. 510, 357-360.

cast a Republican ticket. Powderly's "baptism of fire" as an absurdly young voter introduced him at an early age to the threat that intimidation posed to voters who could not effectively defend themselves. As the labor-affiliated Mayor of Scranton in the late-1870s Powderly pushed for poll watchers and improvements in voter protection, but it was through his leadership of the Knights of Labor from 1879 to 1893 that his advocacy for ballot secrecy had its most dramatic effect.¹⁹

While Powderly's early experience with intimidation at the polls may have primed him to view ballot secrecy favorably, it was the threat of economic voter intimidation that convinced him to make the secret ballot the primary focus of his political advocacy. Looking back on his career after he retired, he mused that it was the pervasiveness of economic voter intimidation, "more than anything else, that brought me into politics in 1876."²⁰ In 1890 the *Chicago Daily Tribune* printed Powderly's lengthy explanation for his seeming obsession with ballot reform:

Every man who toils for a living knows what it is to stand in the sight of his foreman and take a ballot from a ticket peddler who represents a party in opposition to the one in whose behalf the foreman interests himself. It is quite an easy matter to advise the workman to assert his independence at the polls and ignore the boss. Put yourself in the place of a workman who has a wife and five or six helpless children depending on him for support; look into the cellar on that early morning in raw November and count the number of barrels of flour, bushels of potatoes, or pounds of beef; count the number of little feet that will require shoes during the winter; sum up the expenses of the household, and then look into a pocketbook with nothing in it but the hope of the next pay day. Then walk up before the man who can at a word deprive you of the chance to earn a dollar during the whole winter and refuse to take the ticket he offers you. It is expecting

¹⁹ Terence Vincent Powderly, *The Path I Trod; the Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 11-12. Powderly wrote his Autobiography in 1921, it was not published until 1940.

²⁰ As he put it in his autobiography, Powderly decided to fight for "the adoption by law of a secret ballot." Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 174.

too much of human nature to ask a man to starve his children for the sake of his vote.²¹

Powderly forced ballot reform to the center of the Knights of Labor's political discussions. As early as the organization's 1885 annual convention the Knights debated supporting the Australian ballot system, though they chose not take a firm stance at the time. For the next several years Powderly set out to make sure the "masses were educated" on the importance of the issue, raising it in every possible context.²² In 1886 Powderly demonstrated his belief in the secret ballot by arguing that workingmen should use it to decide whether or not to launch a strike. Absent secrecy, Powderly claimed, workingmen could be "influenced by a demagogue" to vote for a strike even if they did not believe in it.²³ The following year, Powderly gave a speech in Denver, Colorado, making clear that he believed formal politics was the proper avenue to advance the cause of labor. Asserting that he was a socialist and not an anarchist, Powderly explained that the difference lay in the fact that he "does not believe in force or dynamite but in the ballot."²⁴ Powderly's long fight to put ballot secrecy at the forefront of organized labor's political demands culminated at the 1888 annual convention of the Knights of Labor. The convention drafted a model secret ballot law to "submit it to the legislatures of the several states for adoption."²⁵ While the particular law that the Knights proposed was not enacted by any states, the model law

²¹ "Powderly, Gorman, and Hill," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 6, 1890, 4.

²² Terence V. Powderly, "On Earth Peace, Good Will Toward Men," *The Cosmopolitan* (New York, NY), v.12, i.2, December 1891, 155.

²³ "Powderly on Strikes," *The Ogdensburg Journal* (Ogdensburg, NY), May 24, 1886, 1.

²⁴ "Not an Anarchist," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), May 21, 1887, 2.

²⁵ Terence V. Powderly, "On Earth Peace, Good Will Toward Men," *The Cosmopolitan* (New York, NY), v.12, i.2, December 1891, 155.

announced the Knights' serious engagement with the issue. That same year Kentucky and Massachusetts enacted the nation's first secret ballot laws.²⁶

Powderly had won the argument about the importance of ballot secrecy within the labor movement by 1889 and sought to encourage his allies to forcefully take up the issue with their elected representatives. That year Powderly led a group of labor leaders in Chicago in a discussion of how to solve the problems afflicting American labor. He emphasized that the only way to protect a workingman from bringing "misery upon himself by his vote" was by giving him the protection of secrecy at the polls. The labor leaders present all agreed that of all the reform causes they would pursue that year the "most important" was ballot reform.²⁷ The *New-York Tribune* noted that Powderly was the driving force behind the "intense feeling among adherents of labor organizations, and particularly among the Knights of Labor" in favor of a truly secret ballot.²⁸ In his effort to make the case for ballot secrecy, Powderly invoked the specter of economic voter intimidation to make his point to the general public. "The employee who voted under the eye of his employer or agent knew that his ballot was known to those around him," and if a worker's boss offered him a ballot he had to vote it "or run the risk of dismissal from his place of employment." He explained that as a result of the "dawning" of the danger of coercion at

²⁶ Kentucky's 1888 secret ballot law applied only to the city of Louisville. The national convention of the Knights and a growing group of state conventions endorsed secret ballot laws in 1889. "Knight Legislators.: Convention Of The K. Of L. At Columbus," Special Dispatch to the *Enquirer, Cincinnati Enquirer*, Feb 6, 1889, 4. In 1889 a national Knights of Labor convention in Atlanta also adopted a strong platform in favor of ballot secrecy to prevent coercion by manufacturers. "Mr. Powderly Gone," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 23, 1889, 7.

²⁷ "Remedy At The Polls: For All The Ills That Labor Is Heir To. But The Ballot Must Be Secret," *The Washington Post*, July 18, 1889, 6.

²⁸ "The Year's Work," *New-York Tribune*, January 3, 1890, 6.

the polls on "the mind of the labor organization... the necessity for a secret method of voting became very apparent."²⁹

Powderly was not content to advocate from the fringes of formal politics. He used his position with the Knights to intervene directly in state level secret ballot fights. In New Jersey's 1890 debate, for example, Powderly advocated for the Republican-proposed measure and against the Democratic one, denouncing it as "not a true ballot reform bill" because it did not follow the Australian System closely enough. While his comments contributed to the Republican bill's advancement through the state senate by one vote, Democratic control over the state house meant that the Republicans, and Powderly, had to settle for a secret ballot law closer to the less-satisfactory Democratic bill.³⁰

Powderly directed particular attention to his home state of Pennsylvania. Speaking publicly about his own experiences with coercion along with those of precarious coal miners and laborers throughout the state, he pushed legislators of both parties to take ballot secrecy seriously.³¹ By the summer of 1890 the *New York Times* acknowledged that ballot secrecy was "the greatest of all political issues in that State." The paper quoted a Democratic party leader's speech which emphasized that ballot secrecy would halt coercion practiced by employers who were "wont to compel their workmen to vote under their order on pain of losing their

²⁹ Terence V. Powderly, "On Earth Peace, Good Will Toward Men," *The Cosmopolitan* (New York, NY), v.12, i.2, December 1891, 155.

³⁰ "Ballot Reform in New Jersey," *New-York Tribune*, May 08, 1890, 2.

³¹ "A Talk With Powderly," *New York Times*, JULY 18, 1889, 2; "Ballot Reform Needed.: Mr. Powderly's Able Plea For The Australian System," *New York Times*, Jan 2, 1890, 1, "Indorsed By The Master Workman.: Powderly Advocates The Australian System Of Voting," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 5, 1890, 5, "MR. Powderly For Ballot Reform," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), May 15, 1890, 3.

employment."³² A newspaper from central Pennsylvania called on the workingmen of the state "to protect such of their fellows as may be subject to the influences of corruption and intimidation when exercising the elective franchise." According to the paper, the best way for workingmen to perform "this duty" was to demand the passage of the secret ballot law.³³

While Powderly acknowledged in 1891 that in some cases the passage of secret ballot laws was "not directly due to the Knights of Labor," he maintained that his organization was responsible for "the agitation which opened up the way" for the introduction of the reform into public consciousness and political discourse.³⁴ The *New York Times* agreed with Powderly, noting approvingly "the active part the labor unions" took in securing ballot secrecy—a reform very much "in the interest of the workingmen." The *Times* emphasized that the secret ballot was "the declaration of the workingman's independence." It finally allowed him to enter the polling place, where all men were supposed to be equal, in perfect freedom as "his own master."³⁵

³² "The Greatest Of All Issues," *New York Times*, August 20, 1890, 4.

³³ "Untitled," *The Cambria Freeman* (Ebensburg, PA), April 17, 1891, 2.

³⁴ Terence V. Powderly, "On Earth Peace, Good Will Toward Men," *The Cosmopolitan* (New York, NY), v.12, i.2, December 1891, 155.

³⁵ "The American Workman," *New York Times*, March 12, 1890, 4. A printer and former Knight named Jacob G. Schonfarber reminded Congress in 1900 that the Knights of Labor had "made the first strong movement in favor of the Australian ballot system in this country." Initiating the fight for ballot secrecy was one of "its main efforts... one of the greatest works." Even a decade after the organization began its decline into irrelevance it deserved to be remembered for its early advocacy of a system of voting that had swept the nation by the turn of the century. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Report of the Industrial Commission on the Relations and Conditions of Capital and Labor Employed in Manufactures and General Business, Including Testimony so far as Taken November 1, 1900, and Digest of Testimony—Volume 7*. 56th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1901, Mis. Doc. No. 495, 111.

Entering the Political Mainstream

Powderly was one of the most influential labor leaders to advocate for ballot secrecy, but he was far from the only one to do so. In 1879 a congressional committee hearing witnesses on the Labor Problem in Chicago were confronted with compelling evidence that employer coercion had become a severe crisis that only the secret ballot could solve. William Halley, printer, publisher, and representative of the National Greenback-Labor Party, appeared before the committee as a volunteer witness to explain that there would be a limit to labor's "forbearance" in what he viewed as an existential struggle against capitalist oppression. Halley emphasized that workers theoretically enjoyed "a potent remedy in the ballot... But we have a perfectly free ballot yet to contend for." Under questioning from the congressmen, Halley described the process of bulldozing and discharge threats that corporations subjected their employees to at the polls. To solve this critical problem and restore the ballot as the "crowning glory in the fabric of political rights," Halley asked for only one thing: the creation of a ballot "free from *surveillance*."³⁶

³⁶ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of the General Depression in Labor and Business, etc.*, 45th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 29, 82. Italics in original. Hereafter *1879 House Investigation—General Depression*. Halley provides a singularly devoted example of labor leaders' interest in ballot reform. Six years after his congressional testimony, Halley, now editor of the Cicero *Vindicator*, a small suburban Chicago paper, seems to have authored a similar claim. In September 1885, an anonymous article that bore Halley's ideas even if it lacked his name compared the current state of election laws in Chicago and nationwide to those of English laws from "a generation ago" and demanded the enactment of "a uniform election law for the United States." The article was vague about the details of what such a comprehensive law would look like. The only requirement he had was that any such bill must "completely guard us against fraud and intimidation of every kind, so that the humblest voter can be guaranteed that his vote is his own instead of another's." The invocation of a national law providing protection for the humblest voter sounds much like Halley's proposals before the congressional committee in 1879. If the author was indeed Halley, he was far from the only labor advocate to maintain support for effective ballot protection as the coercion crisis worsened and congress continued to take no action. "Editorial," *Vindicator* (Cicero, IL), September 9, 1885, 1.

Robert Blissert, a socialist, labor leader, and friend of Henry George, made a similar case to a senate committee in New York City in August of 1883. Blissert described the operation of the secret ballot in his home country of Great Britain in some detail. Most importantly, he emphasized that because "neither the ballot that the man casts nor the man himself is exposed to the public gaze" in the British system, voters did not have to fear violent or economic intimidation at the polls. Without the introduction of such a system in the United States, Blissert feared "a bloody revolution" would break out.³⁷

Just five months before Blissert delivered his testimony in support of the British system to Congress, Henry George published an article in *The North American Review* that examined the corruption of politics and again offered the secret ballot as a solution.³⁸ After detailing the depths of corruption caused by the influence of money in politics, George began to propose solutions. His solutions were virtually the same ones he had offered in 1871. But after all, the evils he had previously diagnosed remained the same, though they had gotten much worse in the past twelve years. While he proposed several minor reforms such as the banning of torchlight parades and the free provision of public halls for political speeches, the introduction of the "Australian plan of voting" remained for George "the greatest single reform" capable of saving the political system.³⁹ This reform, George wrote, would not only remove the avenue of corruption inherent

³⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee—Volume 1*, 48th Cong., 1885, 861.

³⁸ Henry George, "Money in Elections," *The North American Review* 136, no. 316 (1883): 201-11, 204-5.

³⁹ George, "Money in Elections," 208.

in private printing and distributing of ballots in the current system, it would also end the practice of "coercing voters by terror of discharge from employment."⁴⁰

George's appeal for the secret ballot in 1883 was fundamentally the same as it had been in 1871. Instead of appearing in an obscure California journal however, George's views on ballot secrecy were now being published in one of the most prestigious journals in the nation. The critical change in the ensuing twelve years that rendered his second call so much more powerful than his first was the decade of economic voter intimidation that had driven home to thousands of Americans the precarity of working class voters at the polls. George had been correct in 1871, public demand for reform was critical to its enactment. For labor leaders, leftist political activists, and increasingly for mainstream politicians, the emergence of voter coercion as a crisis had moved the need for ballot secrecy into the political foreground.

Because economic coercion was a potent example of the dangers of unregulated capitalism, it is perhaps unsurprising that the first political party to include a call for ballot secrecy in its national platform was the Socialistic Labor Party in 1885. Founded in 1877, the Socialistic Labor Party was mostly made up of German and Jewish workers in the Northeast and Upper Midwest. During the 1880s it was dominated by a leadership group committed to practical political action and alliances with extant parties to improve labor conditions. After 1891

⁴⁰ George, "Money in Elections," 209.

it turned in a more explicitly Marxist direction under the leadership of Daniel De Leon.⁴¹ The Party's 1885 platform demanded wholesale democratic reforms: "Direct vote and secret ballots in all elections. Universal and equal right of suffrage without regard to color, creed, or sex. Election days to be legal holidays. The principle of minority representation to be introduced."⁴² For the next five years the party's platforms repeated virtually the same political demands.⁴³ The party's long-standing advocacy for ballot secrecy was inspired, as the party's leader said in a speech in 1890, by the destruction of the "individuality" of workingmen by the capitalists' coercive efforts to maintain control of the means of production and their workers' lives.⁴⁴

The Socialistic Labor Party was not the only political party on the left to officially endorse the secret ballot before it became a mainstream issue. On the state level, the Greenback-

⁴¹ Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT, "Workmen's Advocate, The Examiner and Morning Journal and Courier," in *The Library of Congress: Chronicling America*. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90065027/>; Sean Cronin, "The Rise and Fall of the Socialist Labor Party of North America." *Saiothar* 3 (1977): 21-33; Socialist Labor Party Records Description. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. <http://rmlc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/html/docs/KCL05168mf.html>; "Socialist Labor Party." Dictionary of American History. *Encyclopedia.com*. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/socialist-labor-party>.

⁴² Platform und Constitution der Soz. Arbeiter-Partei angenommen auf der 5ten National-Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, am 5., 6., 7. und 8. October 1885. Socialistic Library no. 1, January 1, 1886. (New York: National Executive Committee of the Socialistic Labor Party, 1886).

⁴³ For one example see "Notes," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), July 23, 1887, 2.

⁴⁴ "Socialism in New Haven," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), December 20, 1890, 2. Scholars have generally overlooked the Socialistic Labor Party's role in forcing the secret ballot into mainstream political discourse. Fredman's influential history of ballot secrecy incorrectly gave the United Labor Party, a relatively small organization that supported Henry George's single tax plan, credit for being "the first national party to demand the reform in their platform, and indeed the only party to do so before it had swept the country" in 1888. Fredman, *The Australian Ballot*, 33. The United Labor Party is not to be confused with the Union Labor Party, which was created at about the same time. It is unclear why Fredman overlooked this earlier endorsement of the secret ballot in a national party platform in favor of the obscure United Labor Party. Had he included it, however, his contention that mugwump and well-heeled reformers bear much of the credit for popularizing the reform would potentially have been more difficult to sustain. Henry regrettably included this oversight in her manuscript, but it is not central to her argument. Henry, "Progressivism and Democracy," 40. Henry George ran as the United Labor Party nominee for Secretary of State of New York in 1887. The platform that year called for "the Australian system of a secret ballot." "United Labor Convention," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 20, 1887, 4.

Labor Party, which fractured and reformed in a host of configurations between 1876 and 1884, was a leader on the issue in direct reaction to economic voter intimidation. As documented in Chapter Two, the 1878 and 1879 Massachusetts gubernatorial elections were nationally notorious for the coercion of employees by their employers. The Wallace Committee investigation blamed much of the coercion on Republican-supporting manufacturers fearful of the economic consequences of the election of Benjamin Butler, who was nominated by the Greenbackers and a rump faction of Democrats. Butler himself blamed this coercion for his first defeat, and in 1879 he included a proposal to end it in his party's platform. The Greenback-Labor Party convention that nominated him that September announced itself formally "in favor of a compulsory secret ballot."⁴⁵ The platform did not explicitly connect ballot secrecy to the economic voter intimidation practiced in Massachusetts in those elections, but considering the salience of the issue in that state it would be difficult to imagine that the two were unconnected. In 1882 Butler finally won the governorship, running this time on the regular Democratic ticket, but he served only a single one-year term. After his loss in 1883 he again blamed the "civilized bulldozing" of tariff protected employers. "Give the voter the secret ballot," Butler claimed, and no Republican would have a chance to carry the manufacturing districts of the state. When Butler ran for president on the Greenback-Labor ticket in 1884, the secret ballot remained an important issue for him and his supporters. While the party's national platform did not mention voting reform, the state Greenback-Labor Party of Connecticut, in the course of endorsing Butler, took the time to note with approval that he "favors the secret ballot."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "News Summary," *Commercial Advertiser* (Potsdam Junction, NY), September 18, 1879, 4.

⁴⁶ "Connecticut Greenback Ticket," *The Sun* (New York, NY), September 11, 1884, 3.

By 1889, the new technology of the secret ballot had entered the political mainstream. It did so as a result of years of labor advocates arguing that economic voter intimidation undermined the manhood, independence, and citizenship of American workingmen. In 1892 these concepts were so widely accepted that attorneys arguing the case of the defeated candidate in a New York state senate contested election invoked them repeatedly and without explanation. "The gravest menace to the independence of the voter is the publicity of his ballot," the legal brief explained. This was especially true for workingmen, as an employer enjoyed "a powerful lever on his employee." The only way to protect "the great army of common voters" and render dependent wage-laborers into "really independent freemen on election day" was to enact effective compulsory ballot secrecy laws.⁴⁷

Acceptance and Resistance

By the end of 1891 every non-southern state except for Iowa and Kansas had adopted the secret ballot. Those two would follow in 1892 and 1893, respectively. Labor and reform advocates who had claimed the secret ballot would protect vulnerable men at the polls had won the argument against those who claimed that voting in secrecy would reduce Americans' manliness. "We are in the midst of an extraordinary movement," Wendell Phillips Garrison, literary editor of the *Nation* magazine and son of famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, announced in August 1891. While political machine bosses and "manufacturers who wish to

⁴⁷ "Brief for the Contestant, Hon. M.F. Collins," submitted March 28, 1892, in *Proceedings and Testimony Taken before the New York Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, Senate Chamber, Capitol, in the matter of contesting the election of John H. Derby, of the sixteenth senatorial district*, New York State Senate, January 7, 1892, 784.

coerce the vote of their employees" may have asserted that open voting "cultivates a manly spirit," Garrison replied that the opposite was true. The secret ballot, he argued, was "a means of restoring a manly spirit to the voter, protecting him from the consequences of his vote." The movement that Garrison described and the arguments he mustered in its support were generated in large part by labor leaders like Powderly and organizations like the Greenback-Labor and Socialistic Labor Party. Through years of advocacy and organizing they were able to convince the public that economic voter intimidation was a serious threat to workingmen's manhood, independence, and whiteness, not to mention American democracy. It had to be solved by the secret ballot.⁴⁸

Throughout the debate, contrarian voices argued that the secret ballot would undermine workers' manliness rather than restore it. In 1880, a Massachusetts State Senator expressed his concern that voting in secret would discourage the "manly independence of character" of workingmen.⁴⁹ In 1898, after ballot secrecy had become a reality in almost every state, a farmer in Maine wrote in to his local paper to defend the "more sensible and manly methods of years ago" against the "sneak ballot" that had recently become law. Such protection was not needed in rural towns, the farmer explained. While bribery and intimidation "by employers and wealthy persons" might exist in the cities, he considered it a "libel on the character and reputation of our

⁴⁸ Wendell Phillips Garrison, "The Reform of the Senate," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1891 Issue. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1891/08/the-reform-of-the-senate/526218/>

⁴⁹ "The People's Agents: Strong Speeches, By Senators Lilley and French Against Intimidation And In Favor Of A Secret Ballot," *Boston Daily Globe*, February 19, 1880, 4.

hard-working, and it may be, poor, people" to assume that they would knuckle under to coercion. "Let us act like men," the farmer demanded, and cast ballots in the open.⁵⁰

Yet the omnipresence of coercion had already begun to change how Americans viewed the connection between voting and manhood. As states in the North and Midwest rapidly adopted ballot reform, the 1892 Kansas Republican Party Convention argued over whether delegates should cast open or secret ballots. While the convention narrowly decided to vote openly, one delegate's argument in favor of secrecy was particularly telling. "Are we cowards or are we men?" The delegate pondered, he then answered that "we have nothing to hide, but we demand that men be protected against coercion."⁵¹ Manhood and ballot secrecy, he was arguing, were perfectly compatible considering the dire nature of the coercion threat.⁵² Henry George was primarily concerned with the secret ballot's effectiveness at protecting the precarious voter, its effects on the voter's manhood were incidental. As state after state enacted the reform he had long pushed for, he exulted that the concrete results from early adopting states had proved him right. The secret ballot, George declared, "will virtually stop bribery... it will absolutely stop intimidation."⁵³

⁵⁰ Slocum, "For The Maine Farmer: A Hard Blow At The Secret Ballot," *Maine Farmer* (Augusta, ME), November 3, 1898, 5.

⁵¹ "By Fifteen Votes," *Emporia Daily Gazette* (Emporia, KS), January 7, 1892, np.

⁵² Newspapers generally took the same tack. The *New York Times* approvingly noted that ballot secrecy provided "powerful safeguards... for the independence and manhood of the voter." "Republicans And Ballot Reform," *New York Times*, March 17, 1891, 4. In 1889, as the first secret ballot laws went into effect across the nation, *The Washington Post* reckoned with what secrecy in balloting would mean in other areas of politics. When it came to members of the House voting for their Speaker, the *Post* was unequivocal, voting openly was "the only manly way." In regular elections, however, preserving manliness did not require open balloting. In circumstances "where employers might attempt to coerce employees... the secret ballot is well enough, but in a caucus there is no reason for secrecy." Coercion had been so rampant that the truly manly thing to do was to properly protect voters against it. "The Manly Way," *The Washington Post*, November 30, 1889, 4.

⁵³ "A Successful Test," *The Vermont Watchman*. (Montpelier, VT), Nov. 13, 1889, 4.

In 1913, two decades after ballot secrecy had become the norm throughout the United States, the National Civic Federation (NCF) conducted a survey to determine the state of political ethics in America. Led in part by American Federation of Labor President Samuel P. Gompers, the NCF asked hundreds of politicians, newspaper editors, industrialists, and labor leaders throughout the country what gains "the secret ballot," among other reforms, had made "for purity and cleanliness in politics" since 1870. The replies they received were overwhelmingly positive. William Barnes, President of the *Albany Evening Journal* (New York) and a member of the Republican National Committee described the "decided advance in cleanliness in politics" in the last quarter century by stating simply that "as for the secret ballot there cannot possibly be a difference of opinion."⁵⁴ A newspaperman from Louisville, Kentucky, the first city in the country to have the Australian ballot, remarked that "we have, of course, the secret ballot and could not do without it."⁵⁵

The files of the NCF Committee are full of mild irritation at the "somewhat vague and indefinite" responses to the political ethics question. In the opinion of some of the report's compilers this data failed to "furnish an adequate basis for a report." Yet, letters about how political ethics had changed between 1870 and 1913 poured in from governors, senators, congressmen, national party committee members, newspaper editors, and prominent attorneys all over the country. Many mentioned the secret ballot as one of several reforms that had wrought "marvelous and astounding improvements" in American politics. One remarked that "it would

⁵⁴ Letter from William Barnes to Charles R. Miller, June 12, 1914, NCF Archive (NYPL) Reel 183-07.

⁵⁵ Letter from Lewis C. Humphrey, *The Louisville Evening Post*, to Charles R. Miller, May 11, 1914, NCF Archive (NYPL) Reel 183-36/37/38/39.

hardly seem to be necessary to assert the wisdom and value of reforms, such as the civil service reform, the secret ballot reform, and the requirement for publicity of campaign contributions."⁵⁶

The NCF Committee noted approvingly in its official report that in just two decades the secret ballot had "become the rule" in almost every state.⁵⁷

One of the correspondents who took his response to the political ethics question most seriously was William L. Chenery, the Editorial Writer for *The Rocky Mountain News*. "The benefits of the secret ballot are almost infinite in Colorado," Chenery explained. His was a state where "corporations have been so powerful... an attempt has been made by the officials to vote their employees." From this evil, and from the persistent problem of bribery in big cities like Denver, "the secret ballot has been the only relief."⁵⁸ Because it had halted "notorious" levels of coercion by employers, the secret ballot had become "one of the first essentials in the maintenance of a free government."⁵⁹ One hundred years later Political Scientists Didi Kuo and Jan Teorell provided quantitative substantiation of the NCF's anecdotal survey results. While they did not differentiate economic voter intimidation from other forms of "election fraud that relied on information about how voters voted," they determined that the introduction of the

⁵⁶ Letter from Frank Knox, President and Editor, *New Hampshire Union and New Hampshire Leader*, to Charles R. Miller, May 6, 1914, NCF Archive (NYPL) Reel 183-40/41. See also Memorandum: Work of the Committee on Political Ethics. 1/14/1915, NCF Archive (NYPL) Reel 183-64/65/66.

⁵⁷ Memorandum: Work of the Committee on Political Ethics. 1/14/1915, NCF Archive (NYPL) Reel 183-64/65/66.

⁵⁸ Letter from William L. Chenery, Editorial Writer, *The Rocky Mountain News* to Charles R. Miller, June 29, 1914, NCF Archive (NYPL) Reel 183-22.

⁵⁹ Letter from William L. Chenery, Editorial Writer, *The Rocky Mountain News* to Charles R. Miller, June 29, 1914, NCF Archive (NYPL) Reel 183-22.

Australian ballot reduced the likelihood of bribery or intimidation in American congressional elections by approximately 60%.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The secret ballot slowly emerged during the 1880s as the answer to the voter coercion element of the labor question. First introduced into American political culture by Henry George in 1871, by the late 1880s ballot secrecy was seen by labor advocates, ordinary workingmen, and many politicians as the only possible way to protect the independence, manhood, and whiteness of economically dependent men. During an election campaign in the new state of Montana in 1889, a prominent Republican politician named Lee Mantle delivered a speech in Helena intended to rally his party to victory.⁶¹ Mantle focused on the secret ballot, which he promised Republicans would enact to protect miners and laborers from intimidation. It was, he claimed, the only reform which could make "the laboring man in fact as well as in name a free American citizen" by rendering "coercion on election day useless." The Boston rower Michael Enwright, whose congressional testimony was described in the previous chapter, had framed his vision of political equality as a nation in which "my vote is as good as Jay Gould's." Six years later and thousands of miles away Mantle took up the same rhetoric, arguing that the secret ballot would create a nation in which the humblest worker was "the peer and equal of the greatest millionaire

⁶⁰ Didi Kuo and Jan Teorell, "Illicit Tactics as Substitutes: Election Fraud, Ballot Reform, and Contested Congressional Elections in the United States, 1860-1930," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 5 (April 2017): 665–96, 667, 684.

⁶¹ Mantle was a prominent mining baron, brothel owner, newspaper editor, Speaker of the Territorial House of Representatives, and later U.S. Senator. Dennis L. Swibold, *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959* (Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006), 49.

in the land." Though they almost certainly never met, Enwright and Mantle shared an understanding of what political equality had to mean in the United States if universal manhood suffrage was to have any power in an era of rapid industrial expansion. Enwright's testimony in 1883 was a plea to restore his political equality to industrialists like Gould. In 1889 Mantle offered a promise to precarious workingmen like Enwright— ballot secrecy would protect the political rights of workingmen and secure their place as full citizens. Ballot secrecy, Mantle had told a cheering crowd in Helena, would stop coercive employers from "trampling under foot the American ballot, American citizenship, and American manhood."⁶²

⁶² "Rebuke to the Boodler," *The Great Falls Leader* (Great Falls, MT), October 1, 1889, 1.

Chapter Six: "The Only Relief:" The Fight for Ballot Secrecy in Connecticut and New York

"The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of the government, this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by the equivalent free voting procedures."

-Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 21, 3

The secret ballot is a relatively recent reform, particularly in the United States. While it is taken for granted now as an inextricable element of modern democracy, the form of ballot secrecy in use today was first adopted in the United States in 1888. Barely sixty years later the provision for a "secret vote" was included in UN Declaration of Human Rights. The speed with which the secret, or "Australian" ballot became a core tool of democracy has often occluded the difficulty of its enactment. A lack of attention to the process by which ballot secrecy was adopted in much of the United States has also concealed the arguments and motivations of those who fought for and against the reform. To an extent that has remained unremarked upon by scholars, when ballot secrecy was up for debate, economic voter intimidation was one of the most commonly raised and difficult to oppose arguments in favor of reform.

Historians have typically viewed the secret ballot as an anti-democratic reform, or at best an anti-bribery reform.¹ For example, even though historian R. Hal Williams acknowledged that

¹ Gary Cox and Morgan Kousser's otherwise excellent analysis of the effect of the secret ballot's enactment on corruption in rural New York focuses almost exclusively on bribery. While economic voter intimidation was more common in urban areas than rural, it was far from absent, particularly in New York. Gary W. Cox and J. Morgan Kousser. "Turnout and Rural Corruption: New York as a Test Case." *American Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 4 (1981): 646-63. Similarly, John R. Lott Jr. and Lawrence W. Kenny's article connecting women's suffrage with ballot reform states only that "secret ballots prevented many illiterate citizens from voting" and "greatly hampered vote buying since it was much more difficult for those buying votes to monitor which candidates a person voted for." John R. Lott, Jr. and Lawrence W. Kenny, "Did Women's Suffrage Change the Size and Scope of Government?" *Journal of Political Economy* 107, no. 6 (1999): 1163-198, 1168.

the secret ballot had been a boon for "political honesty" he bemoaned how it had "dampened party spirit" by making it difficult for illiterate or low-information voters to participate.² The narrative of elites using the secret ballot to limit the suffrage was certainly true to some extent. White supremacists saw the reform as a tool to further limit African American voting in the South and mugwump reformers in northern states were enthused at its potential to limit the votes of recent immigrants.³ In 1890 Congressman Nathan Frank (R-MO) denounced the secret ballot on the floor of the House as "the latest fad" in a competition between states in the North and South for "the championship which can disfranchise the most voters."⁴ Many ballot secrecy advocates who fervently believed in its capacity to free workingmen from the coercion of their bosses also harbored regressive hopes for the new system. *The Democratic Advocate* newspaper from Westminster, Maryland, for example, announced its support for ballot secrecy in 1889 with the hope that mandating secrecy would stop "employers from coercing workingmen" in the North while requiring literacy would "practically disfranchise thousands of negroes" in southern states.⁵ Because ballot reform involved a set of complex and obscure legal changes, reformers could present it to their constituencies as the solution to almost any problem. Reformers who

² R. Hal Williams, *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896. American Presidential Elections* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 169-170.

³ Sarah M. Henry, "Progressivism and Democracy: Electoral Reform in the United States, 1888-1919," (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 1995), J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-party South, 1880-1910* (Yale Historical Publications. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), Didi Kuo and Jan Teorell, "Illicit Tactics as Substitutes: Election Fraud, Ballot Reform, and Contested Congressional Elections in the United States, 1860-1930," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 5 (April 2017): 665–96, 669, Gary W. Cox and J. Morgan Kousser, "Turnout and Rural Corruption: New York as a Test Case," *American Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 4 (1981): 646-63, 647.

⁴ Congressman Frank, on the Federal Election Law, on June 30, 1890, 51st Congress, 1st Session, *Congressional Record-House* 6814.

⁵ "Sherman's Federal Election Law," *The Democratic Advocate* (Westminster, MD), December 21, 1889, 2.

wanted to use the secret ballot to exclude certain populations from the polls often worked in concert with reformers who believed in secrecy's power to protect vulnerable voters. Yet, when ballot secrecy was the subject of tough debate in northern states, it was not the restrictionists and racists who made the critical coalitions and shifted key votes. The argument that secrecy was necessary to protect workers from their employers ultimately won the day for the Australian ballot in critical states.

Understandably, the first American state to enact a secret ballot law, Massachusetts, has garnered particular attention. With the support of wealthy Boston reformers, Republicans and Democrats, and labor leaders who were enthused about its ability to halt coercion of working-class voters, the Massachusetts secret ballot law passed relatively quickly and with little formal opposition.⁶ This chapter explores two of the states, Connecticut and New York, where enactment of ballot reform confronted powerful opponents. In both states, secret ballot bills backed by a wide array of reformers, labor groups, and leftist parties were blocked, derailed, vetoed, and watered down over the course of several years. 1889 was the critical year for ballot reform in the United States. State legislatures in nine states scattered across the nation passed

⁶ Henry, "Progressivism and Democracy", 385-391. Contemporaries also remarked upon the ease of its enactment: R.L. Bridgman claimed that "only one man came to oppose" the bill in the legislative hearings, and after a lively discussion he ended up "actually making suggestions how the bill could be improved, and seemed to be entirely converted. With this entire lack of opposition to the principles of the bill as a whole, it had a smooth passage." Bridgman worried that "The passage of the law, in the first place, without any opposition, was a marvel... The fact that it has been secured with so little agitation may lead the people to cherish it less than they ought." R.L. Bridgman, "The Australian Ballot System," *Christian Union*, November 14, 1889; 40, 20; *American Periodicals*, 596.

secret ballot laws. Only in New York and Connecticut were those bills vetoed.⁷ In Massachusetts and other states where reform came quickly, it is difficult to discern whether legislators were more convinced by the restrictionist impulses of the reform's elitist supporters or the anti-coercion vision of labor advocates. This chapter argues that in Connecticut and New York, where the success of ballot reform was in doubt, the issue of economic voter intimidation proved the decisive factor in the debate.

The linked case studies of Connecticut and New York explored in this chapter offer a corrective to the view, expressed most recently by political scientists John Fortier and Norman Ornstein, that the secret ballot was adopted "quickly and universally" and "voluntarily by each of the states."⁸ While the reform did indeed sweep through much of the country in just a few years, the moments where it was effectively blocked and weakened offer considerable insight into the most important and widespread arguments for and against the secret ballot. Republican-dominated legislatures in Connecticut debated secret ballot laws from 1884 to 1889, until the Republican Governor finally allowed a relatively weak variant of ballot secrecy to become law.⁹

⁷ Indiana, Montana, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Minnesota, and Missouri enacted secret ballot laws. Massachusetts' law, which had been passed in 1888, went into operation in 1889. Legislatures in Maine, Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois all considered secret ballot laws but they did not gain much traction. "Ballot Reform Progress," *Century Illustrated Magazine* (New York, NY), Vol. XXXVIII, Iss. 5, September 1889, 793. Henry George was surprised by the difficulties involved in passing effective secret ballot laws in New York and Connecticut. At the beginning of 1889 he expressed confidence that "the Australian system of law" would be signed by Governor Hill of New York and was "almost certain to become law in Connecticut." "Talks With Travelers: Henry George Wants the Australian System of Voting Adopted," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 14, 1889, 3.

⁸ John C. Fortier; Norman J. Ornstein, "The Absentee Ballot and the Secret Ballot: Challenges for Election Reform," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 483-516, 486.

⁹ The struggle for ballot reform in Connecticut, while quickly obscured by the lengthier fight in the larger and more politically important state of New York, garnered attention nationwide. Newspapers as far afield as California reported on every step of the fight, treating it as an important test case. "The Secret Ballot Law," *Los Angeles Daily Herald*, May 29, 1889, 5. "The Secret Ballot Bill," *Los Angeles Daily Herald*, June 8, 1889, 6. "The Secret Ballot Bill Signed," *Los Angeles Daily Herald*, June 23, 1889, 7.

In New York, the Democratic Governor vetoed three Republican-written secret ballot bills between 1888 and 1890 before finally signing a strong compromise bill.

In both states, economic voter intimidation was the critical motivator for the proposal of secret ballot bills. In the aftermath of its enactment in New York, for example, attorneys representing the defrauded candidate in a state senate election explained that bribery and coercion were the "twin wrongs" which ballot reform had been enacted to correct. The election law experts, however, emphasized that the "domination practiced by avaricious and grasping employers over their employees," at the polls, had constituted "an evil greater and more far-reaching in its effects than even bribery itself."¹⁰ In the early 1880s, not everyone agreed that coercion was an evil worse than bribery and that it required direct legislative intervention. Leaders of organized labor and socialist activists pushed that concept into the mainstream and made combatting coercion of workingmen a central rationale for ballot reform. Though organized labor and radical socialist organizations did not agree on everything, they shared an interest in preventing the intimidation of workingmen. Notably, their focus on this issue derived from equal parts political calculation and honest desire to help precarious wage workers. In Connecticut and New York the fight for ballot secrecy was long and vicious. At the end both states adopted the secret ballot with the explicit goal of stopping economic voter intimidation.

¹⁰ "Brief for the Contestant, Hon. M.F. Collins," submitted March 28, 1892, in *Proceedings and Testimony Taken before the New York Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, Senate Chamber, Capitol, in the matter of contesting the election of John H. Derby, of the sixteenth senatorial district*, January 7, 1892, 784.

Connecticut: "Socialist Supremacy in the Old State of Connecticut"

Connecticut experienced a particularly lengthy and contentious struggle to reform its ballot laws. The state's narrow political divisions and strong industrial sector make it a compelling site for examining the effect of employee coercion and labor activism on the passage of the secret ballot. Connecticut was a critical swing state in Presidential elections and had a very closely divided electorate in all state elections.¹¹ Adding to the stakes was Connecticut's unusual procedure for electing its governor. If a candidate failed to reach fifty percent of the vote statewide, the state legislature, almost always gerrymandered to benefit Republicans, would choose the next governor. With the Democrats and Republicans nearly evenly divided, even a small defection to a third party or a failure to turn out one's base would result in a hung election. Six men were elected governor between 1878 and 1888—five of them failed to gain a popular majority and were installed in office by the legislature.¹²

With political competition close and fierce, and with thousands of wage working employees throughout the state, it is perhaps not surprising that the state had a long history of bribery, corruption, and economic voter intimidation. Even before the Panic of 1873 drove one-third of the nation's workers into unemployment, bosses in Connecticut were intimidating their employees. Lynde Harrison, previously the Republican Speaker of the state House of Representatives, explained in a journal article that workplace coercion had begun just after the

¹¹ The main swing states in Gilded Age presidential elections were New York, Indiana, Connecticut, and New Jersey. It was these "doubtful states" with tightly divided electorates that "offered the likeliest fields where vote buying or other underhanded schemes could influence the outcome." Charles W. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age*. 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 6-7.

¹² Kevin Murphy, *Crowbar Governor: The Life and Times of Morgan Gardner Bulkeley*, Driftless Connecticut Series (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 105-6.

end of the Civil War and had been continually increasing. Speaker Harrison noted that this kind of intimidation, while not "apparent to the casual observer," had "been none the less effective" at controlling workers' votes.¹³

The Failure of Anti-Intimidation Law

Early efforts to halt coercion in Connecticut centered on banning intimidation at the polls rather than transforming how people voted. In 1846 a Democratic government outlawed any effort by an employer or agent of a company to try to influence the vote of their employees "by threatening to discharge such elector from his employment."¹⁴ Bipartisan coalitions of legislators updated, expanded, and strengthened the law in 1867, 1875 and 1877. During the legislative push for the 1877 revision the governor called for "further safeguards for the protection and purity of the franchise" in light of "the corrupt practices which have recently crept into use in our elections."¹⁵ The final version of the law, which was written by Speaker Harrison and signed by a Democratic governor, banned anyone from acting "within 60 days prior" to an election to "attempt to influence the vote of any operative in his employ by threats of withholding

¹³ Lynde Harrison, "Article I.—The Connecticut Secret Ballot Law," *New Englander and Yale Review* (New Haven, CT), Vol. 16, Iss. 242, May 1890, 401.

¹⁴ The law imposed a fine of \$50-100 on violators. "An Act regulating the Election of Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Senators, Members of the House of Representatives, Treasurer and Secretary," Act of June 15, 1846, ch. 20, 1846 Connecticut Public Acts 20, https://books.google.com/books?id=g9RIAQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA30&ots=C_I6BpcJr3&dq=connecticut%20laws%20passed%201846&pg=PA20#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁵ "The Employment Contract And The Employer's Liability," *American Economic Association*. August 1907; 8, 3; 100.

employment... or who shall dismiss any operative from his employment on account of any vote he may have given at any such meeting."¹⁶

Despite the bipartisan effort, the anti-intimidation laws failed to slow the growth of economic voter intimidation in Connecticut. More and more incidents were reported throughout the depression-marred 1870s and became particularly "notorious" during the contentious 1884 presidential election.¹⁷ Prior to that election, Democratic Governor Thomas M. Waller called for "experimental legislation" to halt the "most shameful scandals" of intimidation that seemed to infect every election in his state.¹⁸ While he was careful not to blame either party, stories and rumors of bribery and coercion grew so common during the campaign that Governor Waller denounced by name the bosses alleged to have made the threats and implored "courageous men" to surround coercive employers and block them from seeing who was voting for whom at the polls.¹⁹ Democrat Grover Cleveland beat Republican James G. Blaine in Connecticut by barely 1,200 votes out of more 130,000 cast.²⁰ In such a tight election, with workers worried over their jobs in a renewed recession, the problem of economic intimidation finally gained sufficient

¹⁶ The penalty for violating the law was increased in the 1877 revision to a fine of \$100-\$500 or imprisonment of six to twelve months, or both. "Political Notes," *New-York Tribune*, Nov 3, 1884, 4; *Public Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut in the Year 1877* (Hartford: The Case, Lockwood, and Brainard Co., Printers, 1877), 246. Also in "Bribery In Connecticut: A Warning Issued By The Independent Committee," *New York Times*, November 1, 1884, 5.

¹⁷ "Editorial Article 1 — No Title," *New York Times*, November 9, 1890, 4.

¹⁸ "The Governor's Message," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), January 10, 1884, np.

¹⁹ "Intimidating Workmen," *New York Times*, November 4, 1884, 5. The governor's announcement was big news, appearing in mostly Democratic papers as far away as Kentucky, see: "Connecticut," *Daily Evening Bulletin* (Maysville, KY), November 5, 1884, 1. Four years earlier an article in the *Times* had rejected rumors of factory owners intimidating their employees, claiming "there is no coercion in the state." "Prospects In Connecticut: The Republicans Working Vigorously And Confident," *New York Times*, October 25, 1880, 1.

²⁰ David Leip, 1884 Presidential General Election Results-Connecticut, Dave Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections, <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?year=1884&fips=9&f=1&off=0&elect=0>.

recognition as to garner an indictment under the state's nearly forty-year-old anti-intimidation statute.

The first and last indictment in Connecticut of an employer intimidating an employee took place in the mill town of Waterbury in the Naugatuck Valley. After the 1884 election, the Assistant District Attorney charged Superintendent Archer J. Smith of the American Mills with intimidation for discharging David L. Davis for "voting the independent Republican ticket for Cleveland."²¹ The *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier* reported that in the aftermath of the election those who voted for Cleveland were "being summarily dealt with" by their employers. There were reports of wage cuts and discharges throughout the Naugatuck Valley.²² Smith readily confessed that the press accounts were true: he had fired Davis for political reasons. The *Times* declared that "popular indignation is very great" against Smith's coercive act. Yet, after only one day of deliberation the presiding judge ruled in favor of Smith and threw out the case.²³

The effort to protect employees through anti-intimidation law had failed miserably. The *Times* speculated that Smith had possessed an unfair advantage because he was defended by influential City and State Attorney George E. Terry, who had openly denounced the law as an infringement on the supervisor's right of free speech. The Smith case drew "much interest in the state" and received brief mentions in Democratic newspapers as far afield as Illinois, Minnesota,

²¹ "Another Nice Scheme. Special Dispatch to the Enquirer," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 11, 1884, 1; "Intimidation Of A Voter: A Case That Causes Indignation In Connecticut," *New York Times*, November 11, 1884, 4.

²² "War on the Mugwumps," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, November 19, 1884, 3.

²³ "Intimidation Of A Voter: A Case That Causes Indignation In Connecticut," *New York Times*, November 11, 1884, 4; "State News," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, November 18, 1884, 4.

Ohio, and Tennessee. They generally described it as a perfect example of how Republicans cheated to win elections in the North.²⁴ The *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that it had been "looked at as a test case by the manufacturers there, and many attended the trial." Smith's rapid acquittal surely suggested to those observers that employers would not be subject to any unpleasant legal consequences if they chose to coerce their employees.²⁵ The case's dispiriting conclusion demonstrated the impracticability of solving the problem of voter coercion through anti-intimidation law. As an article in the *Yale Law Journal* explained, "mere penalties, however severe, will hardly prevent the evil" of employer intimidation at the polls. What states needed to arrest the tide of voter coercion, the article explained, was to "take away the opportunity" to commit the crime at all. The only way to do that was by mandating ballot secrecy.²⁶

The *Workmen's Advocate* Advocates for Ballot Secrecy

Democrats in Connecticut understood that coercion disproportionately threatened their electoral prospects and took the first steps in favor of ballot secrecy. Months before the 1884

²⁴ "Intimidation Of A Voter: A Case That Causes Indignation In Connecticut," *New York Times*, November 11, 1884, 4; "General Local Items," *The Daily Cairo Bulletin* (Cairo, IL), December 2, 1884, 3, "Current Comment," *St. Paul Daily Globe* (Saint Paul, MN), November 15, 1884, 4, "Connecticut," "Another Nice Scheme. Special Dispatch to the Enquirer," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 11, 1884, 1, *The Milan Exchange* (Milan, TN), November 8, 1884, 6, "Untitled," *Memphis Daily Appeal* (Memphis, TN), November 21, 1884, 1. *The Daily Cairo Bulletin* article incorrectly stated that Smith had been found guilty of intimidation.

²⁵ "Another Nice Scheme. Special Dispatch to the Enquirer," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 11, 1884, 1.

²⁶ George E. Hill, "Secret Ballot," *Yale Law Journal* 1, no. 1 (1891): 26-29. Another law review article, anonymously published in the *Central Law Journal* in 1889, explained that "the weak instrument of a penal clause" would never be sufficient to stamp out "more or less elusive evils" like economic intimidation. Only the "compulsory secret ballot... by compelling the man to vote in secrecy," could protect voters from coercion. "Article 1 — No Title," *The Central Law Journal* (St. Louis, MO), February 15, 1889; 28, 7; 153.

election, Democratic state Senator William H. Golden, Jr. had put forward a secret ballot bill.²⁷ To demonstrate the widespread popularity of ballot secrecy he introduced a half dozen petitions signed by 1,951 voters in support of his bill. With the Republicans in control of both chambers of the General Assembly, Golden's early effort had little chance of success. Although in past years Republicans had cooperated in passing anti-intimidation laws, they were initially unwilling to join a bipartisan coalition for ballot reform, possibly because they believed that coercion was likely to rebound to their party's electoral benefit. While the bill received some debate, the majority Republicans quickly tabled and killed it.²⁸

Quietly disposing of secret ballot bills was no longer an option for the Republicans in the aftermath of the 1884 election and the unsuccessful prosecution of Smith. In its January 1886 session the Assembly began serious discussion of ballot secrecy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the secret ballot bill championed by the state senator from the Naugatuck Valley, where the Smith drama had taken place, received the most attention. The bill provided for a secret envelope voting procedure which, while far from the Australian system, offered voters privacy at the polls. First introduced into the state senate's labor committee, the bill was transferred to the judiciary committee. One senator spoke in opposition to the transfer because "the laboring men had the highest interest in this bill... because their ballots have been improperly influenced in the past."

²⁷ "Democratic Senatorial Convention," *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), October 30, 1884, 4. Golden was no stranger to close elections. In the election after he proposed a secret ballot law in 1884 he was reelected by just 20 votes out of nearly 7,000 cast. "Votes for Senators," *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), November 5, 1884, 2.

²⁸ The Connecticut legislature is called the General Assembly. It is made up of an upper chamber, the Senate, and a lower chamber, the House of Representatives. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, January Session, 1884*, Printed under the direction of Allan W. Paige, Clerk (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, Co., 1884), 395, 425, 360, 372, 655.

The struggle over which committee would even conduct hearings was just the first demonstration of the centrality of workplace coercion and organized labor to the Connecticut secret ballot debate.²⁹

In the Connecticut House, the Labor Committee maintained control of the secret ballot bill. When it held a hearing on the bill in early February, ballot secrecy's potential impact on the coercion of workingmen dominated discussion. For two days, workingmen and labor leaders came to the committee to explain how their political equality had been rendered meaningless by their economic dependence on their bosses. One witness called for ballot secrecy to halt the "system of intimidation and bulldozing which was contrary to the spirit and genius of republican institutions." Another explained that the open ballot was "a great injury to the workingmen," as it allowed bosses to observe their employees at the polls and retaliate with discharges after the election. "While some can vote an open ballot," another witness argued, "there are others whose bread and butter depends upon how they vote." Because of their economic precariousness, workingmen were not, the witness claimed, on "equal footing with the rich man so far as the ballot was concerned."³⁰ Perhaps most noteworthy was the testimony of Colonel Edward M. Graves, a prominent workingmen's advocate, Labor Party candidate for mayor of Hartford in

²⁹ "The General Assembly," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, January 22, 1886, 4. That same month a controversy over the timing of morning prayers at Yale College led an anonymous undergraduate to write to the local paper bemoaning the power that wealthy and coercive upperclassmen from the Skull and Bones and other prestigious societies enjoyed over the college. These students had taken "somewhat the character of ward-workers" and "somewhat intimidated" the other students. The letter mused as to whether the result of the prayer vote would have been the same if taken by secret ballot. Undergraduate, "Disgusted Yale Men — Ring Rule Runs the Meeting," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, January 19, 1886, 3.

³⁰ "The Secret Ballot," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, February 10, 1886, 2. "The General Assembly," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, February 11, 1886, 2.

1886, and editor of the sensationalist tabloid the *Hartford Telegram*.³¹ Graves described to the committee the "starving families" he had seen who fell victim to "political intimidation" in the shadow of the state capitol. Graves explained that Hartford was full of desperate workingmen who "had been discharged by their employers because they had dared to vote according to the dictates of their own consciences." While Graves had a personal political motive to advocate for workingmen to be able to cast ballots free of coercion, his political prominence may have elevated the importance of the secret ballot issue for the listening legislators.³²

The Senate and House both passed versions of the secret ballot bill in 1886, but neither bill received enough support in the opposing chamber to become law.³³ In the aftermath of this failure, the cause of ballot reform in Connecticut gained a new and radical ally. Founded in 1883 to publicize the demands of a newspapermen and printer's strike, the New Haven, Connecticut, based *Workmen's Advocate* became "the official journal of the Socialistic Labor Party of North America" in November 1886. As the English-language newspaper of an organization that still

³¹ Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 107.

³² One witness testified that he "had never heard of intimidation" during his fifty-four years working in factories, but he had no objection to the secret ballot. The chairman of the committee, Republican Representative Joseph Roode of Griswold, argued that he "had never heard of any such intimidation in his section" and insisted on "his right to vote an open ballot." He claimed that mandatory ballot secrecy would cause him "to be classed with this class of people who were away down so low that they dare not vote as they thought best." "The Secret Ballot," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, February 10, 1886, 2.

³³ In part because the bills had been shaped by the Judiciary and Labor committees in their respective houses, they were sufficiently different that the House and Senate were forced to create a conference committee to try to settle on one bill. In mid-April Democratic Senator Edward S. Cleveland of Hartford, expressed concern about the lack of progress in the conference committee and advocated passing the House bill as is. Passing any kind of secret ballot bill was "in the interest of workingmen, whose votes," Cleveland claimed, "were in a large measure controlled by their employers." Due to a lack of support from the majority Republicans, Cleveland's effort failed in a tie vote and the conference committee failed to come to an agreement. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, January Session, 1886*, Printed under the direction of Austin Brainard, Clerk (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, Co., 1886), 134; "The Senate," *New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, April 14, 1886, 4.

largely conducted business in German, the *Workmen's Advocate* sought to spread a pro-socialist and pro-labor message broadly, while still emphasizing issues important to its home state of Connecticut and its neighbors. The *Workmen's Advocate* held this official party role until March of 1891 when a Marxist group led by Daniel De Leon took control of the party, created a new party newspaper based in New York, and began to emphasize militant trade unionism and independent political action. As noted above, the Socialistic Labor Party was the first political party to call for ballot secrecy in its national platform. Through the *Workmen's Advocate*, the Party continued to inform its readers of the dangers of economic voter intimidation and advocate in favor of ballot secrecy. While its impact is difficult to calculate, the *Workmen's Advocate* provides a useful barometer for the political left and organized labor's involvement in the debate over voter coercion in Connecticut and throughout the North.³⁴

The *Workmen's Advocate* emphasized in its years-long advocacy campaign that only the secret ballot could stop economic voter intimidation. In late December 1886 the *Workmen's Advocate* demanded the introduction of a "system of secret ballots in all elections" as the first order of business for the Connecticut Assembly and all other states. Underscoring the necessity of reform, the paper stated: "In small factory towns it is an admitted fact that workingmen are coerced into voting for the favorite of their employers through fear of offending them and thereby losing their situations." While the *Workmen's Advocate* noted that "we cannot expect

³⁴ Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT, "Workmen's Advocate, The Examiner and Morning Journal and Courier," in *The Library of Congress: Chronicling America*. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90065027/>; Sean Cronin, "The Rise and Fall of the Socialist Labor Party of North America," *Saiothar* 3 (1977): 21-33; Socialist Labor Party Records Description. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. <http://rmlc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/html/docs/KCL05168mf.html>; "Socialist Labor Party." Dictionary of American History. *Encyclopedia.com*. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/socialist-labor-party>.

much from the bourgeois legislatures," it encouraged "workingmen [to] agitate this question" in the hope that it would force politicians to put themselves on the record regarding economic coercion and ballot secrecy.³⁵

The *Workmen's Advocate* sought to expand the fight over ballot secrecy in Connecticut to incorporate organized labor's campaign for economic equality and a living wage for workingmen. As a new legislative session began, a state convention of Knights of Labor assemblies, trades unions, and the American Section of Socialists met to demand ballot secrecy and propose a model bill to their representatives.³⁶ The *Workmen's Advocate* worried that the Assembly would reject the bill because the new election machinery would be too costly. The paper argued that the government expenses necessitated by a secret ballot bill constituted fair recompense for the low wages that workingmen received. If a living wage was outside the realm of possibility, perhaps the workingmen of Connecticut ought to be paid back in the form of "laws that would protect them in the exercise of their rights, such as a good secret ballot law would afford." That the Socialistic Labor Party's paper would advocate, even if half in jest, for supplementing the pay of poor workingmen in the form of a secret ballot law suggests just how important the issue of protection at the polls was for the political left at the time.³⁷

³⁵ The *Workmen's Advocate* reported claims that in one Connecticut factory "the distribution of a certain ticket among the employees while at work was a broad enough hint to those who were so situated as to make non-compliance and consequent loss of employment disastrous." "Secret Ballot," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), December 26, 1886, 2.

³⁶ Michigan State Representative Judson Grenell, formerly a proud member of New Haven Typographical Union No. 47, introduced the state's first bill "to provide for an absolutely secret system of voting at elections." "Demand for a Secret Ballot," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), January 29, 1887, 2; "Legislative Conference: Trades Unionists, Knights of Labor and Socialists," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), January 22, 1887, 4.

³⁷ "Demand for a Secret Ballot," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), January 29, 1887, 2.

In 1887 and 1888 the secret ballot fight fell into a stalemate. Democrats in the legislature proposed bills that generally followed the envelope system—inferior to the Australian system but still a notable advance—and Republicans, who held majorities in both chambers, stymied them.³⁸ The *Workmen's Advocate* continued its fight for ballot secrecy, emphasizing to its readers that labor parties in Massachusetts and New York were pushing for the reform with all their might.³⁹ In the Summer of 1888 the workingmen of Connecticut formed a new independent labor party. The party sought to unify Democrats, Republicans, greenbackers, land and labor advocates, and socialists in support of, among other things, "a compulsory secret ballot law."⁴⁰ The goal of the new party, the *Workmen's Advocate* explained, was not to win elections but to make the secret ballot "an issue in the State campaign," thereby compelling the "old parties to meet that desire" and pass such a law. As many third parties in the era did, the official organ of the Socialistic Labor Party was calling for the two dominant parties to co-opt the issue of ballot reform from them so long as they actually enacted it.⁴¹ In that spirit, the paper alternately cheered on the Democrats' efforts and denounced the party for seemingly supporting ballot secrecy as "a cheap

³⁸ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, January Session, 1887*, Printed under the direction of W. McConville, Clerk (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, Co., 1887), 936-947.

³⁹ "Going Blindfold: Sharp Criticism of the New York Platform," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), January 22, 1887, 1, "The Labor Party: New York and Massachusetts Contribute," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), September 17, 1887, 1, "Notes," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), July 23, 1887, 2, and "The Socialist Labor Party Of North America: Platform Adopted by the Sixth National Convention," at Buffalo, N.Y., September 1887, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/slp/1887/plat1887.pdf>.

⁴⁰ In their attempt to secure a secret ballot law, the new labor party's organizing committee called on the British-American social clubs of Connecticut to join them in support of the reform. It seems they believed that British-Americans would be pro-secrecy because their native land already had the law. "Labor Men Active," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), July 6, 1888, 4.

⁴¹ "Probable New Ticket: A General Invitation to People Who are Dissatisfied with the Old Parties," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), August 25, 1888, 4.

and safe way to make political capital."⁴² After years of widespread intimidation, legislative debate, and labor advocacy, Connecticut seemed no closer to ballot secrecy in 1888 than it had been after the Smith trial in 1884.

Always a swing state, Connecticut was particularly critical for the Republican electoral strategy in 1888, which unsurprisingly produced a substantial increase in employer coercion. In June, months before balloting began, Senator William E. Chandler (R-NH) explained in a private letter to Levi P. Morton, the eventual Republican Vice-Presidential nominee, that electoral math dictated just two narrow paths to a Republican victory. One was to hold the usual states and win New York, which Chandler saw as a tough prospect given the Democrats' control of New York City. The other was to win the regular states plus Indiana and either New Jersey or Connecticut. Chandler recommended that the party "strive for both chances."⁴³ With the election potentially hinging on Connecticut, Republican employers, who were worried that President Cleveland's low-tariff proposals threatened their businesses, sought to convince their employees to support the Republican candidate.

Republicans in Connecticut allegedly used "political pay envelopes" to coerce their employees into voting for Benjamin Harrison. According to the *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, during the weeks before the election, Connecticut employers distributed workers' pay in gaudy envelopes emblazoned with pro-Republican campaign messages. The paper printed a copy of one of the envelopes and claimed that attempting to threaten employees in their pay packets was so

⁴² "Notes," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), May 28, 1887, 2.

⁴³ William E. Chandler to Levi P. Morton, June 30, 1888, Levi Parsons Morton Papers, Box 2, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division. The Connecticut path: https://www.270towin.com/1888_Election/interactive_map

out of bounds that it would rebound against the Republicans at the polls.⁴⁴ (See Figure 6.1) The messages on the envelopes reminded workingmen just how precarious their prosperity was, hinting that without the tariff their wages would plummet. This was entirely in keeping with the endless pro-tariff messaging of the Republican campaign, summed up by William McKinley's (R-OH) plan to put within reach of "the laboring men of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, all the arguments for protection which are available."⁴⁵ While the virtues of the tariff were standard Republican talking points, the pay envelopes contained an implicit threat. Connecticut employers were threatening that if the election did not go their way, workingmen could lose their means of subsistence. Though not a new tactic, the widespread use of coercive pay envelopes during the 1888 campaign emphasized to many ballot advocates just how critical it was to give workingmen the protection of secrecy at the polls.

⁴⁴ "Contemptible Campaign Work," from the *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), in *The Corrector* (Sag Harbor, NY), October 13, 1888, 2. The Republican *Morning Journal and Courier* printed denials from individual companies, but did so relatively quietly, see: "State Correspondence," *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), October 19, 1888, 4.

⁴⁵ William McKinley to Levi P. Morton, July 19, 1888, Levi Parsons Morton Papers, Box 2, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

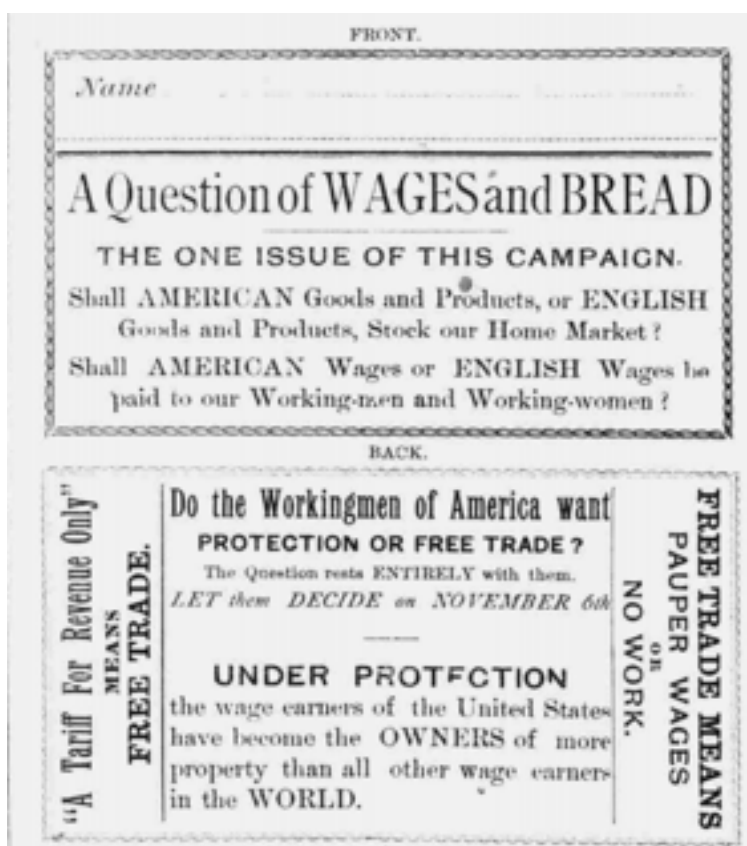


Figure 6.1: A copy of a "political pay envelope" allegedly given to the *Waterbury Evening Democrat* by an employee of the Farrell Foundry and Machine company.⁴⁶

Harrison, Republican nominee, ended up winning New York, thus rendering Connecticut's close vote irrelevant. Nevertheless, Democratic charges that Republicans in Connecticut had engaged in the "shameless purchase of votes and intimidation of voters" gained widespread media attention. Incensed that they seemed to have gotten away with it, the *Waterbury Evening Democrat* argued after the election that the only way to "rob the Republican manufacturer of opportunities" to coerce his employees was to enact a secret ballot. Only ballot secrecy could prevent employers and party operatives from scrutinizing "the ballot cast by the

⁴⁶ "Protection Envelopes," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), October 4, 1888, 4.

workingman."⁴⁷ Even the Republican *Morning Journal and Courier* remarked in December that "something effective ought to be immediately done to secure the secrecy of the ballot."⁴⁸ The *Workmen's Advocate* explained that Connecticut Republicans were trying to cynically co-opt the secret ballot issue. They could "kill the 'democrats' for good" by taking credit for passing a secret ballot law, thus endearing themselves to workingmen and simultaneously robbing labor parties of their most potent issue. While Connecticut's socialists expressed doubt about Republicans' motives, they were encouraged that both major parties had endorsed ballot reform.⁴⁹

The "Weapon of Equality" Comes to Connecticut

As 1889 began, the Socialistic Labor Party in particular and organized labor in general grew increasingly optimistic that the Assembly would finally pass a secret ballot law of some form. In total there were nearly a dozen secret ballot bills introduced in both houses of the Assembly in 1889, written by both majority Republicans and minority Democrats.⁵⁰ Acknowledging that "the question of a secret ballot law is one of the most important" issues before it that year, the Assembly passed a joint resolution requiring the clerks to print 500 copies of every secret ballot bill introduced during the session.⁵¹ To ensure everyone had the most up to date information, the Democrats in the House provided every member with a copy of Boston attorney John Wigmore's recently published pamphlet that described the benefits of ballot

⁴⁷ "Secret Ballot in Connecticut," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), November 22, 1888, 2.

⁴⁸ "Plans for a Secret Ballot," *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), December 10, 1888, 1.

⁴⁹ "New Haven Notes," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), November 17, 1888, 4.

⁵⁰ *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, January Session, 1887*, Printed under the direction of Samuel A. Eddy, Clerk (Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, Co., 1889).

⁵¹ *Journal of the Connecticut House*, 1889, 102, 398.

secrecy.⁵² Between the opening of the legislative session in January and the end of the secret ballot debate in June, the Assembly received forty-six petitions in support of passing a secret ballot bill, and one petition opposed to it.⁵³

The Assembly had a variety of secret ballot bills to choose from. The very first bill of the session, simultaneously introduced in the House and the Senate, was a Democratic secret ballot bill, followed a few days later by a Republican-supported bill in the House.⁵⁴ As the legislative session got underway a committee made up of 120 assemblies of the Knights of Labor and various trades unions presented their own envelope-style secret ballot bill to the Assembly.⁵⁵ But it was the bill that emerged from the Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics that ballot advocates considered the most promising. The bill was ostensibly non-partisan and proposed to employ the full Australian system of marking an official ballot to provide an "inexpensive and simple device for securing to the voter entire privacy in the preparation and deposit of his ballot." Labor Commissioner Hotchkiss explained to the Assembly that he had found "a strong demand for a secret ballot" among both employers and employees in Connecticut's factories.⁵⁶ In his statement in support of this proposed bill, the Labor Commissioner offered a rationale that could easily have been written by the Socialistic Labor Party itself, though his wording was far more

⁵² *Journal of the Connecticut House*, 1889, 269. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Wigmore explained "the labor organizations are taking a prominent part in the movement, for they realize that to organized labor the new system brings at least two positive advantages—first, cheaper nominations and an equal chance for the candidates; second, freedom from intimidation from capitalists, corporations, and employers generally." "Secret Ballot Systems: Rapid Growth Of The Australian Method," *New York Times*, February 4, 1889, 8.

⁵³ *Journal of the Connecticut House*, 1889.

⁵⁴ *Journal of the Connecticut House*, 1889, 27, 29, 76 and "The House Committees," *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), January 17, 1889, 4.

⁵⁵ "For a Secret Ballot," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), February 11, 1889, 4.

⁵⁶ "An Interesting Report," *The Press* (Stafford Springs, CT), February 28, 1889, 1 and "Labor in Connecticut," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), February 16, 1889, 4.

convoluted: "If, as is quite generally said and believed, the workingman, dependent upon his employment for bread, is or may be compelled to prepare and cast his ballot under the eyes of his employer, especially where the political or business interests of that employer are concerned, it is not at all probable that the vote he casts under such circumstances will express his unbiased choice." The *Workmen's Advocate* was thrilled to hear an official of the state, whose position granted him considerable knowledge of the circumstances in which workers toiled, come out so strongly against economic voter intimidation. The Department of Labor's bill, too, met with their approval. It was "the best we have seen on the subject," the radical paper explained, and was one that could be amended further if need be.⁵⁷

After sorting through all the options, the leaders of both parties in the Assembly chose to advance the Department of Labor's bill in the Spring of 1889. It was the only bill singled out by name, nine times, in any of the forty-six pro-ballot secrecy citizens' petitions that the state legislature received. The bill then moved to the Senate Judiciary Committee where it was again championed by the Democratic representative from Waterbury, albeit a different one than in 1886.⁵⁸ The bill proposed to separate the portion of the polling place where the voter actually marked his ballot into a secure section where "an elector shall, while preparing his ballot, be secure from observation."⁵⁹ Just as crucially, it mandated a state-printed official ballot. By removing the ballot from party control and voters from employer observation, the bill promised to reign in aggressive campaigning around the polls and render coercion and bribery far less

⁵⁷ "The Secret Ballot Bill," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), March 9, 1889, 4.

⁵⁸ "Connecticut's Secret Ballot," *The Daily Leader* (Gloversville, NY), May 11, 1889, 1.

⁵⁹ "The Secret Ballot: The Connecticut Law Providing the Weapon of Equality," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), June 1, 1889, 4.

effective. The *Waterbury Evening Democrat* described the bill's possible imperfections but emphasized that "some mode of secret balloting has become an imperative necessity" and so endorsed the bill.⁶⁰ Noting that the bill had been "derived from workingmen" and had the support of "those who are presumed to represent the sentiment of the Labor party," the minority Democrats, who had so frequently been victimized by employer coercion in Connecticut, enthusiastically supported it.⁶¹

As the secret ballot's prospects of passage increased, the reform grew in importance to labor and leftist leaders as a symbol of what peaceful political action could accomplish. The *Workmen's Advocate* published an emotional call in April 1889 for all socialists to "use the ballot, the weapon of equality, for all it is worth." The paper acknowledged the failures of peaceful political reform in recent years, most prominently in the Haymarket affair, but emphasized that the secret ballot rendered all such concerns irrelevant. The *Workmen's Advocate* argued that the introduction of the Australian system in several states was "a hopeful sign" as it promised to "establish confidence again among the people" in their form of government. With a secret ballot seemingly near to passage in Connecticut, the socialists called for a "revival for the ballot among our people" in the form of independent political action.⁶²

⁶⁰ "The Secret Ballot Veto," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), June 8, 1889, 2.

⁶¹ "The Real Fraud Champions," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), June 20, 1889, 2; "The Secret Ballot Veto," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), June 8, 1889, 2.

⁶² "The Ballot," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), April 27, 1889, 2. The Republican legislative caucus had earlier declared the secret ballot bill a party measure and pledged to pass it. "Republicans Will Pass It," *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), May 10, 1889, 4.

At the end of May 1889, both houses of the Assembly passed the bill with overwhelming bipartisan support and sent it to the governor's desk.⁶³ While Democrats had been the driving force for ballot secrecy in 1884 and 1886, there was no denying the bipartisan nature of this achievement. Growing press and popular attention to the Republican Party's use of economic voter intimidation during elections throughout the 1880s prompted Connecticut Republicans to switch sides in the secret ballot fight. In an abrupt about-face, Republican legislators played a significant positive role in 1889, introducing bills and resolutions in favor of ballot secrecy and using their power as the majority party in both chambers to make it a legislative priority. The *Workmen's Advocate* declared victory, announcing that the bill "is considered sure to get the Governor's signature." The paper printed the full text of the law under a banner headline declaring it "The Secret Ballot: The Connecticut Law Providing the Weapon of Equality."⁶⁴ Both major parties and one of the most radical socialist political organizations in the nation were in agreement: because only ballot secrecy could halt economic voter intimidation, it was a necessity in Connecticut elections.

⁶³ "Untitled," *The Press* (Stafford Springs, CT), May 30, 1889, 2. The House passed the bill 183-9 on May 22. *Journal of the Connecticut House*, 1889, 987.

⁶⁴ "The Secret Ballot: The Connecticut Law Providing the Weapon of Equality," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), June 1, 1889, 4.

Governor Bulkeley Disappoints

The Socialistic Labor Party had celebrated far too soon. Republican Governor Morgan G. Bulkeley vetoed the bill.⁶⁵ Bulkeley claimed in his veto message that the law was overly complicated and could disenfranchise illiterate voters.⁶⁶ While the governor's claims seemed disingenuous, they generally squared with his public position before the bill was passed. In his 1889 annual message Bulkeley had encouraged the Assembly to examine the issue of providing protection against "imaginary or possible intimidation of the voter." He had cautioned its members, however, to enact a law "simple in its character" that would not cause delays or necessitate extensive public expenses. While he knew that the extant law did not provide "absolute secrecy," he was just as concerned that any new ballot laws would not be "too cumbrous."⁶⁷ The *Workmen's Advocate* was understandably apoplectic. It denounced the Governor's betrayal, insinuating that machine politicians had bribed or coerced him into it. The paper noted that the veto was "contrary to the expectation of his friends and the public generally (and perhaps his own)."⁶⁸ The Socialistic Labor Party was not the only labor organization incensed at the Governor's veto. The Knights of Labor assembly in Waterbury unanimously

⁶⁵ Regrettably Kevin Murphy's otherwise useful biography of Governor Bulkeley inexplicably errs in its description of the secret ballot bill. Murphy incorrectly describes the bill that Bulkeley vetoed as one "designed to do away with secret ballots in the General Assembly." Murphy briefly discusses the veto message and even quotes Bulkeley's concerns that the bill was "so experimental in its character, so cumbersome in its details, so burdensome to the voter in its operation, so expensive in its machinery, so unharmonious with existing laws, that it can only prove a burden and failure." Murphy does not mention that Bulkeley signed the compromise bill a few weeks later. Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 116.

⁶⁶ "Untitled," from the *Hartford Post* in the *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, June 12, 1889; Lynde Harrison, "Article I.—The Connecticut Secret Ballot Law," *New Englander and Yale Review* (New Haven, CT), Vol. 16, Iss. 242, May 1890, 401.

⁶⁷ *Message of His Excellency Morgan G. Bulkeley, Governor of Connecticut to the General Assembly Session of 1889* (Hartford: The Press of Case, Lockwood, and Brainard Company, 1889), 14-15.

⁶⁸ "The Election Law: The Rotten 'democratic' and 'republican' Machines Work Together," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), June 29, 1889, 4.

passed a vote of censure against the Governor and demanded the passage of a free and fair ballot law at once.⁶⁹

By 1889 labor leaders in Connecticut had spent years experiencing or hearing stories about economic voter intimidation. They were convinced that it was a serious problem and believed ballot secrecy was the only way to stop it. They struggled to understand how, despite the righteousness of their cause and their extensive lobbying efforts, Bulkeley could cast aside the legal protection that workingmen desperately needed at the polls. Economic voter intimidation had become an all important issue for socialists and labor leaders in Connecticut, and both branches of the Assembly had heard copious testimony on the issue. But for the Governor of Connecticut, ballot secrecy was less important than the bill's provisions creating an official ballot. Bulkeley cared little for the workplace coercion issue, but he had a personal and political stake in the ability of parties to manipulate ballots on election day.

Governor Bulkeley's political career had been built on bribery and party control of the ballot. While he was never accused of countenancing the intimidation of voters, Bulkeley was widely known to have used the weaknesses of the extant voting system to his advantage. In 1880 he jump-started his political career by bribing hundreds of poor Irish Democrats to vote him into the Hartford mayor's office. Allegedly, the scheme involved providing desperate men who normally cast Democratic ballots with \$5 worth of flour, meat, and groceries at the grocery store owned by Bulkeley's good friend Gideon Winslow.⁷⁰ Bulkeley also took advantage of the ability of parties to control the printing of their own ballots when he last ran for Mayor of Hartford in

⁶⁹ "Governor Bulkeley Censured," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), June 11, 1889, 4.

⁷⁰ Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 52-55, 79-80, 82.

1886. Facing off against a passel of candidates including one man running on the Union (Labor) ticket, Bulkeley had his name printed on a "Citizen ticket" as well as the traditional Republican ticket. Bulkeley's ability to freely print ballots gave his ticket pushers the ability to press ballots with his name on ill-educated voters who may have thought they were taking a labor ticket. Coupled with extensive bribery, this trick won Bulkeley a narrow reelection victory and set the stage for his gubernatorial run.⁷¹ The *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, well aware of his history, had all but predicted the veto two months earlier, noting that Bulkeley "never could hope under such a ballot" to win a popular majority.⁷² When the Governor announced his veto the paper fatalistically remarked that Bulkeley's support for ballot reform had been "discounted sometime in advance."⁷³ The Democratic paper held that Bulkeley would perhaps be willing to accept ballot secrecy, but he would not countenance an official ballot.

The importance of economic voter intimidation to the existence of ballot secrecy in Connecticut is readily apparent in the hurried legislative debate that followed the Governor's veto. The House of Representatives' Judiciary Committee was left in the unenviable position of

⁷¹ Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 95.

⁷² "Secret Ballot," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), March 21, 1889, 2. Four years after the veto Bulkeley explained his political philosophy before a state senate committee investigating corrupt election practices. Bulkeley described his comfort with bribery of workers who did not have strong political preferences, explaining: "I don't believe that there is a more honest man in Connecticut than he who for a day's work goes to the polls and votes as you want him to." It was entirely proper, the former Governor testified, for a man "to influence in any way the unintelligent, ignorant and unprincipled voter to vote his party ticket." As the *New York Sun* explained in an 1886 profile: Bulkeley had "no convictions as to the potency of cash in politics as a persuasive argument." "Corrupt Practices: Bulkeley's Views," *Hartford Courant*, May 12, 1893, 1, quoted in Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 127; "Three Men with One Wish," *New York Sun*, August 8, 1886, 3, quoted in Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 108. Murphy argued that as early as 1882 Bulkeley's "complete indifference to the state's bribery statutes became common knowledge" and had a negative impact on his support from the more principled wing of the Republican Party. Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 80.

⁷³ "The Secret Ballot Veto," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), June 8, 1889, 2.

quickly producing a bill that Bulkeley would be willing to sign. Trying to determine what elements of reform the Governor would be amenable to, one committee member advocated a bill that "provides for a secret ballot and does no more." The problem with the vetoed legislation, he explained, was that it had sought to solve too many problems. Secrecy was the main issue, and the Governor would accept a bill on those terms. One witness before the committee made explicit what the ballot secrecy was needed to stop, arguing that it was "demanded by the people because of the intimidation of voters rather than the buying and selling of votes." Ira W. Blach, a Selectman and member of the Knights of Labor from Manchester, emphasized that the form of the ballot was less important to labor than its concealment: "the Knights demand a secret ballot, whether envelope or other system." At the tail end of the longest legislative session in state history and with the legislators under massive public pressure, ballot secrecy remained on the agenda almost exclusively because it promised an end to economic voter intimidation.⁷⁴

Connecticut did get a secret ballot bill in the summer of 1889, but instead of the strong bill the Socialistic Labor Party had advocated for, Governor Bulkeley signed into law a weaker and more complex bill. The mechanics of the law bear some explanation as they reflect the priorities of the parties involved and the persistent relevance of employer coercion in the ballot reform debate. Written largely by Republican former-Speaker of the state House Lynde Harrison, the law that Bulkeley signed offered substantially less protection to precarious voters than the one he had vetoed. It established a convoluted system that required the Secretary of State to print blank ballots, stamp "official ballot" on the back, and distribute them to political parties to fill

⁷⁴ "The Closing Work," *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), June 20, 1889, 4; "Untitled," *The Press* (Stafford Springs, CT), June 27, 1889, 2.

out the candidates and offices. The new law was nearly identical to the secret ballot bill that had died in conference committee in 1886.

Bulkeley's critics believed the system was intended to allow him to continue his political schemes.⁷⁵ According to the *Hartford Courant*, Bulkeley later made good use of the weakness he had written into the new law. In 1894 he "knifed" a Republican candidate for state senate who had crossed him by placing his Democratic opponent's name on "Republican" ballots that his political fixer printed up.⁷⁶ The Governor had personal reasons to want to preserve party control over the ballot even after reform—it allowed him to meddle in elections at will—but he had no such inclinations for or against ballot secrecy. While the semi-official ballot arrangement Bulkeley foisted onto the state could potentially allow parties to manipulate illiterate or low-information voters into making the wrong choice, the compromise bill still contained unprecedented provisions for ballot secrecy. To begin with, the standardization of the ballot helped protect voters. Under the new law no one could tell just by seeing the size or color of the ballot a man carried who he was voting for. Voters would still have to carry their ballots to the polls, running the familiar gauntlet of ticket pushers and poll watchers. But then voters would duck into a voting booth and seal their chosen ballots into an official envelope that they

⁷⁵ "The Secret Ballot," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), June 22, 1889, 2.

⁷⁶ "Bulkeley and McGovern," *Hartford Courant*, November 8, 1894, 6, quoted in Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 134. Notably the *Courant*, though nominally Republican, was run by a group of Connecticut politicians who disliked Bulkeley and his electoral methods. Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 125.

deposited in the ballot box, taking them out of view of potential intimidators.⁷⁷ Considering the massive increase in labor activism and popular attention on the issue in the three years that had passed, however, it was a depressingly small advancement. The hurried manner in which the law was written and signed also troubled reformers who felt robbed of their strongest political issue. The *New York Times* worried that the mess in Connecticut had "set ballot reform back" in the state and potentially the nation, and the Republican leader of the ballot reform effort in New York denounced it as a "sham" that did not give voters the protection of total secrecy.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ For details on the operation of the Connecticut ballot law of 1889 see Arthur Ludington, "Present Status of Ballot Laws in the United States." *The American Political Science Review* 3, no. 2 (1909): 252-61, 254-6. The flaws in the the law emerged in the next gubernatorial election, when a printing error by the Prohibition Party threw the election into a legal blackhole. No candidate seemed to have received an overall majority, and with the Assembly divided between Democrats and Republicans, no resolution was forthcoming. Governor Bulkeley, though not a candidate for re-election, refused to relinquish the governorship and ended up serving the entire two-year term. Bulkeley's continued occupation of the governorship was a nationwide scandal. One politically engaged New York lawyer denounced him in a letter to Governor Hill of New York as "the Pretender in Connecticut," which seems to have become a common title. Hill threatened that New York would no longer honor criminal extradition orders from Connecticut while Bulkeley remained in office. In response, Bulkeley threatened to put 200 New Yorkers who were in Connecticut state prisons on express trains back to their home state where he assumed "every one would prove a loyal subject." The Democratic comptroller put a new lock on an office in the Capitol building which Bulkeley had a deputy sheriff remove with a crowbar. When the Democratic state senate refused to provide appropriations to run what many of its members considered an illegal government, Bulkeley, serving concurrently as president of Aetna Life Insurance Company, had his company "loan" the state government nearly \$300,000. Aetna was later reimbursed by the state. See Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 120-126, Steve Grant, "The Year that Connecticut Elected Nobody Governor," *Hartford Courant*, November 3, 2002, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2002-11-03-0211032496-story.html>, "Bulkeley Says To Hill: The Rule of Non-Reciprocity In Criminals Cuts Both Ways," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 1891, 1, "Letter to Hill," Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, Box 1-129-H-5, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations;

⁷⁸ "Reform Won Against Odds," *New York Times*, May 3, 1890, 1, "For An Honest Vote: A Talk Wth Mr. Saxton About Ballot Reform," *New-York Tribune*, November 25, 1889, 2. Historian Lionel Fredman dismissed Bulkeley's forced compromise as an entirely "unsatisfactory" law. Fredman, *The Australian Ballot*, 49. See: "The Secret Ballot," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), June 22, 1889, 2.

The "Bastard Secret Ballot Bill"

The *Workmen's Advocate* diagnosed the problems of the new law immediately, noting that while it allowed for the possibility of a secret ballot, under the new rules "it is not compulsory."⁷⁹ This was potentially a fatal flaw in the system that could allow intimidation and bribery to continue. Lynde Harrison himself later admitted that ballot laws which permitted people to use a secret ballot "at the option of the voter" generally failed to protect workers from intimidation.⁸⁰ *The Weekly Examiner*, Connecticut's less radical labor paper, was equally incensed, denouncing the "bastard secret ballot bill" for its shortcomings.⁸¹ The newly reformed Labor Party and the new Industrial Reform Party called for "an absolutely secret ballot" and "a secret ballot on the Australian plan" in their respective platforms, expressing dissatisfaction with the new law but also potentially a desire to recapture for labor what had proven to be a potent political issue.⁸² The *Workmen's Advocate*, which had in the recent past been willing to allow the Democrats and Republicans to take the credit which was sure to accrue to whichever group provided true protection to the workingman at the polls, noted fatalistically that "all this was to be expected." The radical paper now embraced independent political action, calling on the people of Connecticut to "victoriously vote the straight Socialist ticket." With the promise of ballot secrecy weakened by the dominant parties, the only way to achieve "justice" for the downtrodden

⁷⁹ "The Election Law: The Rotten 'democratic' and 'republican' Machines Work Together," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), June 29, 1889, 4. Italics in original.

⁸⁰ Lynde Harrison, "Article I.—The Connecticut Secret Ballot Law," *New Englander and Yale Review* (New Haven, CT), Volume 16, Issue 242, May 1890, 401.

⁸¹ "Notes Political," *The Weekly Examiner* (New Haven, CT), October 11, 1890, 4.

⁸² "The Labor Party's Platform," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), July 22, 1890, 4. "A Labor Ticket In Connecticut," *New York Times*, October 21, 1890, 1.

worker was to embrace radical socialism. "No sacrifice should be too great to offer for the consummation of socialist supremacy in the old State of Connecticut."⁸³

As the new law went into effect, some observers took a more hopeful view of its effect on workingmen's political freedoms. At its first test in municipal elections in October 1889 there was some confusion but voters generally cast their ballots in peace in the pleasant "absence of the usual crowd" of observers and ticket pushers. The lack of observers at the polls meant that workingmen were finally able to cast ballots without fear of retribution from their employers. In the mill and factory town of Birmingham, just twenty miles down the Naugatuck River from Waterbury, the Republican *Morning Journal and Courier* reported that the "working people from the factories had no difficulty" casting their new ballots.⁸⁴ The *Scranton Free Press* noted that in past years Democrats had regularly and uncontroversially accused Republican manufacturers in Connecticut of intimidating their workers. Now though, "their bulldozing was rendered impotent under the secret ballot system." While the *Waterbury Evening Democrat* quibbled with other papers' laudatory description of the mechanics of the new law, the paper agreed that the secret ballot had reduced the incidence of economic voter intimidation in the state.⁸⁵

The *New-York Tribune* offered a careful parsing of the effects of the new ballot law. The paper wholeheartedly endorsed its provision of secrecy, which it viewed as "the vital feature of the reform" because it stopped "the coercive influence of employers." The staunchly Republican

⁸³ "The Election Law: The Rotten 'democratic' and 'republican' Machines Work Together," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), June 29, 1889, 4.

⁸⁴ Birmingham has since been renamed Derby. "The Voting Yesterday," *Morning Journal and Courier* (New Haven, CT), October 8, 1889, 2.

⁸⁵ "The Secret Ballot," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), October 23, 1889, 2.

Tribune acknowledged that "there has been relatively more actual coercion of voters by employers in Connecticut than in any other State" and that this widespread coercion had made ballot secrecy "peculiarly attractive to certain classes of workingmen." But of course it was not Republicans who were to blame, the paper claimed. Connecticut workingmen had voted for tariff protection because they knew it was in their best interests. It was the Democratic employers, the *Tribune* alleged, who had resorted to "a great deal of actual coercion or intimidation" when their free-trade promises were rejected by discerning workingmen. Thus, the secret ballot in Connecticut would rebound to the advantage of the Republicans. Whether or not this assertion was true, and it probably was not, the *Tribune* confirmed the existence of economic voter intimidation, argued that it had inspired the activism of workingmen in favor of ballot secrecy, and concluded that secrecy would provide real protection at the polls for workingmen.⁸⁶

The secret ballot's ability to prevent economic voter intimidation proved its most noteworthy feature in the immediate aftermath of its enactment. In the wake of the 1890 national election the *New York Times* explained to its readers that "imperfect as the Connecticut ballot law is," it had been a success solely because it had protected "voters from coercion" by their bosses. The paper described how it had been "notorious in times past," meaning just two years ago, that "employers have required their operatives to vote as directed on pain of dismissal." With the new secret envelope and voting booth system in place, employers would no longer be able to have their employees "watched as they went to the polls." The *Times* attributed a noticeable increase in the Democratic vote in manufacturing towns to the introduction of ballot secrecy and spoke

⁸⁶ "The Secret Ballot," *New-York Tribune*, October 9, 1889, 6.

glowingly of the improved system and its prospects for securing the privilege of workers to vote their own convictions.⁸⁷

The *Workmen's Advocate* also emphasized the ability of the new ballot law to protect workingmen from their bosses at the polls. Setting aside its concern over the specific details of the law, it acknowledged the "great step forward" that the ballot law represented and sought to take credit for the advancement. The paper bragged that "this ballot will be absolutely secret." Without acknowledging its earlier enraged reaction to the law's particulars, the *Workmen's Advocate* proudly declared that "these reforms are an advance along the lines of Socialism." In a sense this was entirely correct. The movement towards ballot secrecy in Connecticut received a substantial boost from the advocacy of labor and leftist groups like the Socialistic Labor Party. The fact that the law was imperfect was, from the perspective of those who had argued in vain for years for any protection from coercion, less important than the fact that it had been passed at all. Calling it a "great step forward" and a reform "along the lines of Socialism" may have been a bit of political opportunism, but such pronouncements were far from unreasonable.⁸⁸ As awkward and defective in some respects as the law was, it brought the crisis of economic voter intimidation in Connecticut to an end.

The fight over ballot reform in Connecticut demonstrated the importance of economic voter intimidation as a central driving force in the passage of secret ballot laws. Coercion of employees was the overwhelming focus of witness testimony in the Assembly's hearings and was

⁸⁷ "Editorial Article 1 — No Title," *New York Times*, November 9, 1890, 4. Some skeptics came around after the spring municipal elections in Hartford, where Bulkeley had so often engaged in bribery and corruption, which in 1890 which went off without a hitch. "A Very Slim Majority: The City Of Hartford Still Republican," *New York Times*, April 8, 1890, 1.

⁸⁸ "Communications," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), November 1, 1890, 2.

a constant feature of election coverage in the state from 1880 to 1888. The Socialistic Labor Party's official journal devoted extensive coverage to the various ballot reform bills, each time emphasizing the scope of the problem of coercion and the need for compulsory secrecy to stop the ongoing destruction of democratic ideals at the polls. When the time came for a final decision, Governor Bulkeley chose to allow the enactment of a form of ballot secrecy in exchange for the preservation of a manipulable party ballot. Bulkeley's trade-off suggests that the issue of economic voter intimidation had become too potent for any politician to directly oppose.⁸⁹ These themes would play out similarly, though with even greater vitriol, in New York the following year.

New York: "The Friend of the Workingman"

As the ballot reform struggle in Connecticut was concluding in 1889, the campaign in New York was just getting under way. Support for the secret ballot in the nation's largest and most electorally important state came from all parts of the political spectrum, but its enactment

⁸⁹ Cynically, the Governor's decision can also be explained by his own political ambitions. While he did not plan to run for any popularly elected office again, Bulkeley did covet a US Senate seat. The Connecticut Assembly, generally Republican in those years, could install him in office without a popular majority, much as it had done to place him in the Governorship in 1888. The Republican caucus, which was where the true decision was typically made, voted on Senate appointments by secret ballot, and had done so for many years. However, when Republicans caucused in 1905 to decide who would take the open senate seat that Bulkeley coveted, he had the good luck to be facing an opponent who had recently been caught up in a scandal. Bulkeley demanded the vote take place by open ballot, forcing supporters of his tainted opponent to announce their perfidy openly. Bulkeley won an overwhelming victory. Murphy, *Crowbar Governor*, 128, 163-4.

still took years of struggle.⁹⁰ The loose coalition in favor included Mugwump reform groups like the Ballot Reform League, City Reform Club, Commonwealth Club, and the New York State Bar Association. It also featured nationally prominent labor unions such as the Knights of Labor and the emergent American Federation of Labor, leftist parties including the Socialistic Labor Party, and groups with more local constituencies such as the New York Central Labor Union and Henry George's Single Taxers and their offshoot United Labor Party. The bulk of the state Republican Party also came to endorse ballot reform, viewing it as an effective political issue as well as a worthy cause.

The opposition to the various ballot reform bills that trickled through the legislature in 1888, 1889, and 1890 came from the Democratic Party. As the battle wore on and ballot reform passed in more and more states in the North and Midwest, however, just one man stood between the people of New York and the secret ballot: Democratic Governor David B. Hill. Hill's reputation within the state and throughout the nation was as a pure partisan. A banker in far off Minnesota wrote to him to express his respect for a man he proudly called the "prince of fellow Democrats."⁹¹ Hill enjoyed his partisan reputation immensely, beginning all of his speeches with

⁹⁰ "The state of New York is now, in the language of politics, the 'pivotal' state, because its vote usually determines the result of the presidential election, and in it the two great parties are so evenly divided that the change of a few votes may determine the majority." Abram C. Bernheim, "The Ballot in New York," *Political Science Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1889): 130-52, 151-2. "New York is the pivotal State in politics. It has, and will have for years to come, the casting vote... political forces are very evenly balanced in this state; so evenly that it is made the fighting-ground in every National campaign." Thomas C. Platt, "Republican Success in New York," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), March 8, 1890, 98. Between the 1880, 1884, and 1888 presidential elections the margin between the two major parties in New York averaged just 0.5%. Gary W. Cox and J. Morgan Kousser. "Turnout and Rural Corruption: New York as a Test Case," *American Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 4 (1981): 646-63, 649.

⁹¹ Letter from Robert Miller to Timothy Shaler Williams, September 17, 1889, Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, Box 1-129-H-5, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations.

the declaration: "I am a Democrat." Even his opponents acknowledged he was the most "astute, adroit, relentless" Democratic politician the state had seen in decades.⁹² The consummate machine politician, though with national ambitions, Hill did not oppose ballot secrecy. Instead he opposed reform because he believed that the creation of an official ballot in place of the party produced ticket would rob him and his party of control of the polls.

For two years, labor leaders, upstate Democrats, mugwump reformers, and socialists sought to convince Hill that workingmen's need for protection from coercion was severe enough that it should override his desire to preserve a manipulable ballot. Essentially, these unlikely allies in favor of reform had to convince the Governor that the fraudulent or illiterate votes he would lose from tighter ballot security would be more than counterbalanced by the freedom to vote Democratic that ballot secrecy would give to precarious workingmen by protecting them from the undue influence of their employers on election day. Ballot reform came to New York courtesy of the crisis of economic voter intimidation.

Historian Herbert J. Bass who explored the New York ballot reform struggle in a *New York History* article and a biography of Governor Hill, both published in 1961. Bass mentioned economic voter intimidation as a contributing factor to ballot agitation only once, and labor agitation relatively briefly. In the more than half-century since Bass' work, the fight for the secret

⁹² Thomas C. Platt, "Republican Success in New York," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), March 8, 1890, 98.

ballot in New York state has garnered little scholarly attention.⁹³ The New York secret ballot fight exemplifies the power that economic voter intimidation had over political discourse in the late-1880s. Even the supremely powerful governor and political boss of New York, who had no interest in ballot reform on a practical or moral level, could not avoid the issue. In New York, economic voter intimidation changed minds and laws.

Prophets of Reform: Henry George and Charles Saxton

The inciting incident for ballot reform in New York was the 1886 New York City mayoral election. Henry George, running on the United Labor ticket, outpolled Republican candidate Theodore Roosevelt and came up just short of the Democratic nominee. Incensed that corruption may have kept George from the mayoralty, a passel of reform groups—the Commonwealth Club, City Reform Club, and the Single Tax Party—gathered during the Winter of 1887 to hash out

⁹³ Herbert J. Bass, "The Politics Of Ballot Reform In New York State, 1888-1890," *New York History* 42, no. 3 (1961): 253-72, and Herbert J. Bass, *"I Am a Democrat"; the Political Career of David Bennett Hill* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1961) <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015016757331;view=1up;seq=27>, 7. Lionel Fredman described the New York case briefly and his sympathies lay almost entirely with the reformers, particularly the well-heeled mugwumps. He classified some of Hill's early arguments against the Australian ballot system as "patently ridiculous," and focused on the inadequacies of the bill actually passed, rather than the arguments surrounding its enactment. Lionel E. Fredman, *The Australian Ballot: The Story of an American Reform* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968), 43-4. John Reynolds and Richard McCormick described the pressures for and against reform in New York, but only mentioned intimidation once. John F. Reynolds and Richard L. McCormick, "Outlawing 'Treachery': Split Tickets and Ballot Laws in New York and New Jersey, 1880-1910," *The Journal of American History* 72, no. 4 (1986): 835-58, 851. Historian Jill Lepore's 2008 *New Yorker* article on how Americans used to vote described how Massachusetts' passage of ballot secrecy "put pressure on David Hill, the Democratic governor of New York, who vetoed an Australian-ballot bill three times, even after fourteen men carried to the floor of the New York legislature a petition weighing half a ton. (One of his arguments was that its restriction on campaigning at the polls violated freedom of speech.) But New York, which finally adopted the reform in 1890, proved the only state to deliberate at such length. Elsewhere, state legislatures swiftly adopted the reform, persuaded, no doubt, of the need to clean up elections but also, in some places, eager to solve the 'problem' of the expansion of the suffrage by restricting it." Jill Lepore, "Rock, Paper, Scissors: How We Used To Vote," *New Yorker*, October 6, 2008, printed in the October 13, 2008 issue, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/13/rock-paper-scissors>.

what form a New York secret ballot bill should take.⁹⁴ The bill they created was introduced in the following year's legislative session. After a series of compromises and committee maneuvers it passed both houses thanks largely to the support of upstate Republican Charles T. Saxton, chairman of the State Assembly's Judiciary Committee.⁹⁵

The 1888 Saxton Bill, as it and all subsequent Republican-supported ballot bills came to be known, had two main components. The bill mandated secrecy by compelling voters to fill out their ballots in a private booth and deposit them in a concealed ballot box, and it required an official ballot printed at public expense. These provisions remedied what the New York Society for Political Education identified as the "two loop-holes of neglect" in the state's election laws that allowed bribery and intimidation to persist.⁹⁶ While creating an official ballot was an important way to reduce fraud, the Society for Political Education focused on the advantages of the secret ballot. The Society maintained that breaking the chain of information that connected voters to their ballots was necessary to prevent anyone from exploiting working-class voters' "bonds of debt, of employment, of association."⁹⁷ Absent ballot secrecy, elections in New York

⁹⁴ William M. Ivins, "Address and Paper on Electoral Reform," *Proceedings of the Twenty-ninth Annual Meeting of the New York State Bar Association, held at Alba New York, NY, January 16-17, 1906* (Albany: The Argus Company Printers, 1906), 237, 239; *Electoral Reform: With the Massachusetts Ballot Reform Act and New York (Saxton) Bill* (New York: The Society for Political Education, 1889), 15. The Socialistic Labor Party was also upset that George had been defrauded. Cronin, "The Rise and Fall," 22. For more on George's platform and campaign see "The Labor Party: The New York Platform—Sketch Of Mr. Henry George," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), September 25, 1886, 6 and Robert E. Weir, "A Fragile Alliance: Henry George and the Knights of Labor," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 56, no. 4 (1997): 421-39.

⁹⁵ Wigmore, *The Australian Ballot System*, 12; and Fredman, *The Australian Ballot*, 42-3. Confusingly, the legislature of Connecticut is called the General Assembly, made up of the House and Senate, while the legislature of New York, which has no official name, is made up of two houses: the Assembly and Senate. For a laudatory but interesting profile of Saxton see "For An Honest Vote: A Talk With Mr. Saxton About Ballot Reform," *New-York Tribune*, November 25, 1889, 2.

⁹⁶ *Electoral Reform*, 6.

⁹⁷ *Electoral Reform*, 8.

would continue to be marred by economic coercion even if the corruption of assessments and bribery was lessened by the introduction of an official ballot.

Both organized labor and the mainstream press emphasized in their coverage that the Saxton Bill would protect workingmen from economic intimidation at the polls. The Central Labor Union of New York "earnestly" entreated Governor Hill to sign the bill, explaining in a public resolution that ballot reform "has been earnestly demanded by the workingmen of the State" to protect them from bribery, fraud, and intimidation.⁹⁸ The *New York Times* emphasized the help that the new law would provide to workingmen, describing how the current system created opportunities for the "coercion and intimidation of such voters as are in a position of more or less dependence." Ballot secrecy was "by far the most important bill" left for the governor to sign as the 1888 Spring legislative session came to a close and the support of "workingmen's organizations" suggested to the press that the Governor would have to sign it to maintain their essential political support.⁹⁹

Public pressure in favor of ballot reform was so strong that Governor Hill took the unprecedented step of presiding over an informational hearing on the bill in the executive chamber. Henry George appeared in support of the bill to announce that ballot reform was "the greatest of reforms," more important even than the single land tax proposal for which he was world famous. George was followed onto the stand by Dr. Edward McGlynn, a Roman Catholic priest who had been excommunicated for his support of George's Single Tax movement and his

⁹⁸ "Central Labor Union," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), June 9, 1888, 3.

⁹⁹ "The Ballot Reform Bill," *New York Times*, May 24, 1888, 4; "The Governor And Ballot Reform," *New York Times*, May 18, 1888, 4.

association with the secretive Knights of Labor. McGlynn argued that ballot secrecy was necessary to prevent a radical overthrow of American capitalism and democracy. By protecting workingmen as they voted, the Saxton Bill would "allay the fault-finding of the Socialists" who used the prevalence of electoral corruption to claim there was "no use going to the polls" so violent revolution was the only solution to the labor problem.¹⁰⁰

Despite this compelling testimony, Hill vetoed the Saxton Bill. Much like Governor Bulkeley of Connecticut, Hill claimed he objected only to the official ballot provisions of the bill, not its secrecy provisions. Hill had legitimate practical concerns to raise here, but he assuredly acted in bad faith in doing so.¹⁰¹ The governor had been elected under the current system and believed that his reelection prospects rested on two constituencies that had conflicting priorities on ballot reform. Hill knew that he needed to appeal to working class voters by compiling a pro-labor record, but he also relied on the thousands of voters, many illiterate or persuadable, who were brought to the polls and "voted" by downstate Democratic machines. The continued ability of the machines—most famously Tammany Hall—to control these voters rested on their control of the ballots. If the state printed ballots and distributed them at the polls, Hill's mercurial allies would lose their critical leverage over voters who turned to them for their tickets,

¹⁰⁰ "Abuses Of The Ballot: Hearing Before The Governor On The Electoral Reform Bill," telegraph to the *Tribune*, *New-York Tribune*, May 26, 1888, 2.

¹⁰¹ One of Hill's concerns was that giving state officials the responsibility to distribute ballots meant that if an official mistakenly or intentionally did not deliver the right ballots to a precinct the voters there would be disenfranchised. This proved prescient when during a state senate election in 1891 ballots in two precincts were accidentally switched. Hill took advantage of the error to throw out all the switched ballots and declare the Democratic candidate the winner. For more on this and related contestations see Edward Foley, *Ballot Battles: The History of Disputed Elections in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 179-190.

instructions, and post-election glass of whiskey.¹⁰² Yet, by the late-1880s, the working class voters who were just as important as Tammany Hall for Hill's reelection had begun to identify ballot secrecy as a critical issue. Hill's veto of the Saxton Bill in 1888 began a lengthy struggle in which the governor desperately tried to placate workingmen who demanded ballot secrecy without compromising machine control of the ballot.

Keeping party control over the ballots was a substantial advantage for a man of Hill's ambition and morals. With the printing of ballots diffused to hundreds of district organizations it was relatively easy for a dedicated politician to substitute one name for another on a critical number of ballots without anyone noticing. When illiterate or uninterested voters took their ballots from the ticket pushers outside the polls, they were unlikely to notice that their ballot did not reflect the decision of the party convention. "Knifing," as this practice was called, was extremely common in Gilded Age elections.¹⁰³ There is circumstantial evidence that in the 1888 election that took place just after Hill first vetoed the Saxton Bill, the governor knifed his archrival Grover Cleveland in the presidential race while ensuring his own reelection. It was a maneuver that would have been impossible had the Saxton Bill's official ballot become law. The returns seem to suggest something nefarious happened: Hill won by 17,000 while Cleveland lost the state, and thus the Presidency, by 13,000 votes. The large discrepancy between the votes the two Democrats received angered contemporaries and has troubled historians for a century. Just after the election, the editor of the *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette* expressed in a private letter to

¹⁰² Ivins, "on Electoral Reform," 277; Hill also took the opportunity of the veto to cement his popularity among his largely Irish base by denouncing the Australian ballot for its connection to the hated British Empire. Bass, *I am a Democrat*, 121-125.

¹⁰³ For descriptions of knifing see: Joseph B. Bishop, "The Secret Ballot In Thirty-Three States," *Forum*, January 1892, 589, Bass, *I am a Democrat*, 97, and Reynolds and McCormick, "Outlawing 'Treachery'."

a Republican ally that he had "to some extent wonder at" the split result between President and Governor. In what seems to be a veiled reference to Hill the editor remarked that he thought he could "trace the influence that brought it about."¹⁰⁴ Cleveland had publicly refused to endorse Hill, and while the governor campaigned extensively for the national ticket and said all the right things in public, the missing endorsement rankled. (See figure 6.2.) Whether or not the acrimony between the two Democrats resulted in a covert knifing, party control of ballots left that weapon on the table for a state party leader like Hill. He was reluctant to surrender that power without recompense.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Mr. Halsted to Levi P. Morton, November 15, 1888, Levi Parsons Morton Papers, Box 2, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division. These accusations lingered. During the Federal Elections Bill fight in late 1889 the pro-Democratic *Evening Journal* of Wilmington, Delaware, denounced the Republicans as "the party which bought Indiana and traded for New York in 1888." "Humbug Party," *Evening Journal* (Wilmington, DE), December 18, 1889, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Bass argues that the knifing charge was based on after-the-fact resentment from Cleveland's allies and makes little sense from Hill's perspective as it would have been far better for Hill if Cleveland were reelected and thus unlikely to run in 1892. Bass, *I am a Democrat*, 121-125. See also: Reynolds and McCormick, "Outlawing 'Treachery'," 849-850.



Figure 6.2: The pre-election cover of the staunchly Republican magazine *Judge* depicted the distrust bordering on hatred that had developed between the two New York Democrats. The caption reads: "This marriage is a failure. Miss Hill— "You must write a letter endorsing me, and so redeem my character." Cleveland— "I can't— I should lose what little character I've got." The paper that Cleveland holds reads "If you indorse Hill we quit. Mugwumps." Hill's paper reads "Certificate of Marriage Grover Cleveland to Miss Democrat B. Hill. Not Endorsed."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ "This Marriage is a Failure," *Judge*, October 20, 1888, 1, in Levi Parsons Morton Papers, Scrapbook 2: 1878-1879, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

Much as it was in neighboring Connecticut, the 1888 federal election was a critical inflection point in the pursuit of the secret ballot in New York, and not just because of Hill's alleged knifing of Cleveland. With the national campaign centering on the tariff, protected manufacturers felt increased pressure to ensure a Republican victory. 1888 saw an unprecedented number of accusations that manufacturers in tariff-protected industries were forcing their workers to vote Republican on pain of discharge. While some of the accusations by Democratic newspapers were politically motivated, they were sufficiently common and came from a wide enough variety of sources that they seem to have reflected real fears.¹⁰⁷ Workingmen, labor leaders, and reform advocates took them at face value and acted accordingly. Widespread accusations of economic intimidation during the 1888 election, coming just months after Hill's veto of the Saxton Bill, gave added impetus to ballot reform in New York and across the nation.

Just before election day, accusations of economic intimidation reached the front page of the *New York Times*. The *Times* noted that "in certain cities and villages of the State the coercive employer has been very offensive in past years," and this year the "manufacturers of the Republican faith have been importuned by the National and State Committees to poll their employees and make certain of every vote for the national ticket." The 1888 election, however, would be different from those that came before because for the first time since the outbreak of the crisis of economic voter intimidation "the office of United States Marshal [had] fallen into the possession of the Democrats" during a presidential election. The *Times* hoped that the

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Harrison privately expressed before the election that he believed "the vest-pocket vote is with us," especially in his home state of Indiana. Benjamin Harrison to Levi P. Morton, October 29, 1888, Levi Parsons Morton Papers, Box 2, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

machinery of federal enforcement would for the first time find "some way of reaching that class of offenders who coerce their employees in political campaigns."¹⁰⁸ The *Times* pinned its hopes on federal officials like Marshall Walter H. Bunn, who had charge of upstate New York where "intimidation has been regularly practiced by manufacturing employers." Bunn issued orders reminding his officers that it was their job to enforce federal laws that banned intimidation of all kinds, including economic coercion.¹⁰⁹

To win reelection, Governor Hill knew he needed to maintain the support of both organized labor and the downstate political machines.¹¹⁰ He had vetoed the Saxton Bill to protect the political machines' control of ballot distribution but his decision left workingmen at the mercy of their employers. The state Democratic Party's platform, dictated by Hill's allies, tried to straddle the ballot issue, calling for reform while also endorsing Hill's veto of the "grossly defective" Saxton Bill. The platform emphasized that a secret ballot was needed to stop "undue influence and coercion on the part of corporations, employers, and others," but that the Saxton Bill had been fatally flawed.¹¹¹ Hill sought to reassure workingmen that despite the veto he

¹⁰⁸ "A Hint To Bull-Dozers: Federal Marshals Will Prevent The Coercion Of Workingmen," *New York Times*, November 2, 1888, 1.

¹⁰⁹ "A Hint To Bull-Dozers: Federal Marshals Will Prevent The Coercion Of Workingmen," *New York Times*, November 2, 1888, 1 and "Intimidation By Protected Manufacturers," *New York Times*, November 2, 1888, 4. The Democratic National Committee did not leave it to the US Marshals to prevent coercion. Just before the election the DNC appointed a committee of prominent citizens (including De Lancey Nicoll, August Belmont, William Steinway, Frederic R. Coudert, and Oswald Ottendorfer) to offer monetary rewards for "information of attempts to bribe voters or intimidate employees intending to vote." This committee claimed that the Republicans planned to win New York with a combination of extensive bribery and the "general intimidation of employees" in factories throughout the state. "To Stop Bribery and Intimidation," *The Evening World* (New York, NY), November 2, 1888, 2 and "Now Look Out For Them!," *The Sun* (New York, NY), November 2, 1888, 6.

¹¹⁰ *The Evening Post* explained that when labor parties waged independent candidacies, the majority of "labor voters are drawn from the Democratic parties." "Early Political Activity," *The Evening Post* (New York, NY), May 28, 1890, 5.

¹¹¹ "Wanting Ballot Reform: Efforts Making To Secure Purity Of Elections," *New York Times*, December 31, 1888, 8.

remained a champion of their interests. He published a campaign pamphlet called "Words and Deeds of Interest to Workingmen" that trumpeted his pro-labor record.¹¹² But such pleas seemed increasingly desperate as Republicans framed themselves as the true protectors of workingmen on the strength of their advocacy of ballot secrecy. Even worse, well-known figures on the labor left, Henry George and Dr. Edward McGlynn most famous among them, publicly excoriated Hill for standing in the way of ballot secrecy.¹¹³ While Hill had intended for his opposition to the Saxton Bill to strengthen his productive alliance with the downstate machines, it now had placed his own and his party's electoral prospects in jeopardy by weakening his labor support.

Hill Sets the Terms of Debate

Hill won reelection in 1888 but Republicans preserved control of both branches of the legislature. All observers expected that ballot reform would be the primary legislative issue of the next year's session.¹¹⁴ In a New Year's Day message that devoted more than half its text to voting issues, Hill sought to redirect the conversation over ballot reform by adopting the rhetoric of labor advocates. In his message Hill advocated for ballot secrecy to stop economic intimidation while denouncing efforts to create an official ballot—and thus interfere with the

¹¹² Campaign Pamphlet, "Words and Deeds of Interest to Workingmen," 1888, MssCol 1396, Box 3, David B. Hill Papers, NYPL Rare Books and Manuscripts Division; Democratic papers defended Hill during the campaign as "one of the most faithful, conscientious, public-spirited governors" in the state's history. "Untitled," *The Gilboa Monitor* (Gilboa, NY), November 1, 1888, 1

¹¹³ "United Labor's Champion," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), October 18, 1888, 4; "They Want Ballot Reform," *New York Times*, October 16, 1888, 2.

¹¹⁴ The *New York Times* noted that most political observers had expected Hill to be "rather predisposed in its favor" because it was "popular with workingmen throughout the state" and expressed surprise that he was willing to alienate such a critical portion of his base by opposing ballot secrecy. "Wanting Ballot Reform: Efforts Making To Secure Purity Of Elections," *New York Times*, December 31, 1888, 8.

shenanigans of his machine allies—as a waste of time and effort. Hill explained he had learned that "at the recent election in many places employers or their principal foremen stood all day at the polling-place windows and handed their employees their tickets as they approached to vote... thereby effectually coercing the workmen and controlling their votes." He also took the opportunity to loudly denounce the use of political pay envelopes, which, as in Connecticut, had flooded factories before the election. Such devices were plainly intended to "frighten workmen and deter them from voting the ticket of their choice." Hill supported banning political messages in pay envelopes and enacting ballot secrecy because he believed those reforms would stop employers from coercing their employees into voting Republican. And if those reforms could be enacted without changing the nature of the ballot, then Hill and his Tammany allies would maintain their ability to distribute tickets to voters and knife adversaries. His own political survival was the the only consideration that guided Hill's careful positioning on the ballot reform issue.¹¹⁵

Despite his dedication to his own ambition, Hill did forthrightly endorse ballot secrecy as a solution to economic voter intimidation in his annual message. While he viewed "the evil of bribery" as the "disgrace of the age," Hill explained that "the wrong of intimidation and undue influence is also becoming common and is likewise dangerous." While probably genuine, his desire to stop economic intimidation allowed him to rationalize his opposition to the mandatory official ballot. Since intimidation and undue influence were growing rapidly and posed such a threat to democracy, Hill argued, there was no time to mess about with the form of the ballot.

¹¹⁵ "Gov. Hill's Message," *The Evening World* (New York, NY), January 1, 1889, 4.

Hill argued that secrecy and secrecy alone was all that was needed to halt this particularly pernicious wrong. The Governor's position reflected his understanding of the changing political dynamics after the 1888 election. If he wanted to maintain labor support he needed to forcefully denounce coercion, but to keep his productive alliances with the downstate machines he needed to keep party control of ballot distribution.¹¹⁶ As tendentious as his position may have appeared, it reflected the mushrooming increase in attention to the issue of economic voter intimidation and its importance in the ballot reform debate.¹¹⁷

Hill treated his argument in his New Year's Day message that secrecy halted coercion and should be enacted without delay—or encumbrance by the official ballot—as his definitive statement on the matter.¹¹⁸ For the rest of the year, whenever Hill received inquiries about the pace and nature of ballot reform, his private secretary, Timothy Shaler Williams, replied with copies of his veto messages and the text of his annual message. As attention to the goings on in New York grew, requests for information "bearing upon the subject of ballot reform" poured in from all over the state and nation. Williams found himself replying to messages with increasing desperation as Democratic governors in New Jersey and Indiana supported ballot reform bills in

¹¹⁶ "Governor And Legislature," *New York Times*, January 20, 1890, 4.

¹¹⁷ "Gov. Hill's Message," *The Evening World* (New York, NY), January 1, 1889, 4. The *Workmen's Advocate* was impressed by Hill's argument that only ballot secrecy could prevent "employers from so successfully influencing or intimidating their employees at the polls." The paper lauded his expressed support for a compulsory secret ballot law and commented that "it seems that the socialistic 'demands' formulated years ago were prophetic." "Untitled," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), January 5, 1889, 2.

¹¹⁸ Not all observers agreed. One newspaper account accused him of fusing honesty about the corruption common in voting with the "instincts of the martinet" in his veto of the Saxton Bill at the behest of downstate machine bosses. Mason A. Green, "Article I.—The January 'Messages' On Election Bribery," *New Englander and Yale Review* (New Haven, CT), May 1889; 14, 230, 311.

direct opposition to Hill's position.¹¹⁹ There were so many requests that the secretary had to repeatedly apologize to correspondents that he had run out of copies of some of the documents.¹²⁰ The pressure that economic voter intimidation had placed on workingmen at the polls had been translated up the political ladder to labor advocates, reporters, legislators, and now governors across the nation.

While he knew that public opinion had turned against him, Governor Hill made no attempt to disguise his distaste for the ballot reform law written by his political enemies. Hill again vetoed the bill that he and his secretary dismissively referred to in official correspondence as the "so-called Saxton Ballot Reform Bill."¹²¹ In his second veto message the Governor again positioned himself as a supporter of ballot secrecy while maintaining his opposition to the official ballot. Hill wrote that secrecy was the "one leading feature of this bill which I consider of vital importance" and claimed that he "would most heartily approve" of a secret ballot bill so

¹¹⁹ "The Outlook," *Christian Union* (New York, NY), Vol. 39, Iss. 3, January 17, 1889, 65. Also in January 1889 the influential editor and publisher of the *The North American Review*, Allen Thorndike Rice, delivered a scathing rebuke of Hill's tactics. Rice had been an advocate of ballot secrecy to halt the corrosive "habit of voting at the bidding of employers" since 1886. In 1889 he touted its ability to halt "the undue influence of the employer over the employed." Ballot reform was, he believed, "an uncompromising crusade against political knavery—a war to the death—as it was a war to the death against American slavery." The influential editor/publisher's invocation of abolitionism and war should have been a sign to Governor Hill that the issue of ballot reform was not going to disappear. Allen Thorndike Rice, "Recent Reforms in Balloting," *The North American Review*, July 1, 1886; No. 143, 628; Allen Thorndike Rice, "The Next National Reform," *The North American Review*, January 1889, Vol. 148, No. 386, 82-85, 84.

¹²⁰ There are more than twenty such letters in Williams' files, for the best examples see: Letter response to J.H. Anderson, Esquire of New York City Dec 15, 1889 and Letter response to Hon Daniel J. Ryan, Secretary of State, Columbus, Ohio, December 21, 1889, Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, NY Governor Volumes A, Letter Book of Secretary, December 11-May 22, 1889-1890, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations.

¹²¹ See, among others, Letter response to George H. Carr, Esquire, Florida, NY, November 19, 1889; Letter response to Hon Daniel J. Ryan, Secretary of State, Columbus, Ohio, December 21, 1889; and Letter response to Elliot P. Kiener, Hazelton, PA, May 31, 1890, Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, NY Governor Volumes A, Letter Book of Secretary, December 11-May 22, 1889-1890, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations; Bass, *I am a Democrat*, 134.

long as it did not change the form of the ballot itself. Hill argued that secrecy was what "the people" regarded as "the most important feature of real electoral reform." An official ballot, he asserted, simply got in the way of protecting workingmen from the coercion of their bosses.¹²²

As the agitation for ballot reform grew to what reform leader William M. Ivins characterized as a "continuous" murmur, the off-year state elections threatened to deliver Hill's Republican rivals even greater control of the legislative agenda.¹²³ One Republican paper, *The Daily Leader* of Gloversville, expressed its outrage at what it viewed as Hill's rank hypocrisy in vetoing the Saxton Bill while courting the labor vote. In a pre-election article titled "A Blow at the Workingmen" the paper explained that in New York, as in other states, "labor organizations have urged the passage of a secret ballot bill" to protect the poor man from bribery and "the laboring man from intimidation" at the polls. While the paper denied that Republican bosses intimidated their employees at the polls, it expressed confusion as to why Hill, who had repeated such accusations, would veto the Saxton Bill. After all, under its provisions "intimidation at the polls by any employer would have been rendered impossible." The paper denounced Hill for standing in the way of a reform that even a majority of Democratic leaders wanted to see passed

¹²² "The Saxton Bill Vetoed," *New York Times* May 14, 1889, 9. This was virtually the same position that Tammany Hall took when its General Committee met in January 1890. While it loudly denounced the Saxton Bill as written, the organization voiced strong support "to any bill which will provide for the isolation of the voter while preparing his ballot." "Denouncing the Saxton Bill," *New-York Tribune*, January 25, 1890, 2. Hill was also battling the County Democracy political machine which switched sides and supported ballot reform. "On The Side Of Reform: County Democracy's Anthill Programme," *New York Times*, November 13, 1889, 5; Bass, *I am a Democrat*, 140.

¹²³ Ivins, "on Electoral Reform," 277; Coverage of Hill's veto, entirely negative, appeared as far afield as the Washington Post: "The Saxton Bill Veto," *The Washington Post*, May 16, 1889, 4, and the *Baltimore Sun*, "Gov. Hill on Ballot Reform," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), May 14, 1889, 1.

and emphasized that ballot secrecy had rendered obsolete "the intimidation of the working man by his employer" in the nine states where it had already gone into effect.¹²⁴

Even the Democratic-leaning *Boston Daily Globe* sought to create separation from Hill's maneuverings. The paper tried to ensure the Democrats would get credit for the spread of the secret ballot nationwide by asserting that the party in Massachusetts "has nothing to do with the political squabbles at Albany."¹²⁵ Saxton, recently promoted to the state senate, emphatically defended both the official ballot and the secrecy provisions of the law he had written. He would compromise with Hill only if the Governor would give in on both counts.¹²⁶

Labor Rallies for Secrecy and Against Hill

Organized labor made itself heard on the ballot issue in 1889 and early 1890, and its sympathies were not with Hill. For a governor who believed his reelection prospects rested in large part on the enthusiastic support of organized labor, the breadth and intensity of labor's anger over his opposition to ballot secrecy must have been terrifying. The New York State Trades

¹²⁴ "Some Interesting Reasons," *The Daily Leader* (Gloversville, NY), October 21, 1889, 2. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* also covered the ballot reform issue in the run-up to the election, emphasizing that "especially workingmen... concede the benefits of the secret ballot." It also compared the defects that Hill had allowed to persist in New York's ballot laws to the imperfect but far superior Connecticut system that had received its first test in October. The experiment in Connecticut, while marked by some confusion at the polls, had "absolutely put an end to all attempts to bribe or to intimidate voters" and the failure to pass a similar bill in New York grew increasingly galling in view of its smaller neighbor's success. "The Secret Ballot a Success," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), November 2, 1889; Issue 1781, 223.

¹²⁵ "A Democratic Measure," *Boston Daily Globe*, Nov 11, 1889, 4. The Republican *New-York Tribune* invoked the successful trial of the Massachusetts secret ballot law that November as yet more evidence that Hill's "fears that he expressed in his veto messages on Mr. Saxton's bill were baseless." "Mr. Hill And Ballot Reform," *New-York Tribune*, November 25, 1889, 6.

¹²⁶ "For An Honest Vote: A Talk Wth Mr. Saxton About Ballot Reform," *New-York Tribune*, November 25, 1889, 2.

Assembly, the New York and national branches of the American Federation of Labor, thirty-four New York assemblies of the Knights of Labor, and the Socialistic Labor Party all denounced Hill's two vetoes and loudly endorsed the Saxton Bill.¹²⁷ By the end of February, the *Evening World* reported that "almost every labor organization throughout the State of New York" had endorsed ballot reform in general and the Saxton Bill in particular.¹²⁸ The Republican *New-York Tribune* commented that if Hill were to veto the Saxton Bill for a third time "in the face of the growing demand for its passage by the leading labor organizations of the State," he would expose his supposed care for workingmen to be nothing more than a "transparent sham."¹²⁹ The *New York Times* expressed confusion at Hill's opposition to a bill that offered "a guarantee of his independence" for a workingman who was being forced to choose between voting his chosen ticket and providing "daily bread for himself and his wife and children."¹³⁰

To observers in the national press and the New York labor movement, the Saxton Bill struggle became a fight between Hill and Knights of Labor leader Terence Powderly over which one of them was truly "the friend of the workingman." The *Chicago Daily Tribune* expressed the widespread sentiment among laboring men that Powderly was the true inheritor of that title thanks to his consistent support for ballot secrecy.¹³¹ Republican leaning papers delighted in

¹²⁷ "Favor a Secret Ballot," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), December 12, 1889, 1; "Federated Labor," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), December 21, 1889, 2-3; Bass, *I am a Democrat*, 149; "Federation of Labor: Annual Convention of the New York State Branch," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), February 8, 1890, 4; for reporting on the New York AFL convention see: "Favoring a General Registry Law," *The Elizabethtown Post* (Elizabethtown, NY), February 6, 1890, 3.

¹²⁸ "News from Labor's World," *The Evening World* (New York, NY), February 25, 1890, Last Edition, 2. Hill's annual message again called for ballot secrecy, arguing that "this provision alone would do much to prevent corruption and would secure the chief benefits of true electoral reform." "Some Plan Needed. To Make the Ballot Free from Intimidation," *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 8, 1890, 1.

¹²⁹ "The Workingmen Demand Ballot Reform," *New-York Tribune*, March 31, 1890, 6.

¹³⁰ "The American Workman," *New York Times*, March 12, 1890, 4.

¹³¹ "Powderly, Gorman, and Hill," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 6, 1890, 4.

comparing Powderly's writings and speeches arguing that ballot secrecy would make a wage worker "in truth a freeman," to Hill's tortured logic on the subject.¹³² When Democrats, Republicans, and members of the United Labor Party gathered in Harlem in early February to adopt a joint resolution in favor of a secret ballot law, the comparison was on their minds. The United Labor Chairman for the district contrasted Hill and Powderly's stance on the issue. Hill, he claimed to general applause, was a "demagogue" who in truth "did not represent labor."¹³³

As Hill struggled to find a solution to rising labor and national pressure for ballot reform he received critical advice from another state where ballot secrecy was already a reality. In the critical month of March 1890, as the legislature debated the third Saxton Bill, Timothy Shaler Williams, Hill's secretary, began a correspondence with Nathan Matthews Jr., Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee, co-founder of the Massachusetts Ballot Act League, and future mayor of Boston. Matthews' letters detailed the political effects of the new Massachusetts secret ballot law and contained suggestions for how Hill should handle the issue in his state. The side of the correspondence that survives suggests that Williams took the advice seriously and shared the letters or at least Matthews' arguments with Hill. Williams considered Matthews' insight important enough that he sent him copies of the Governor's vetoes and public messages before they had been reported in the press.¹³⁴

¹³² "Workingmen And Ballot Reform," *New-York Tribune*, July 22, 1889, 4.

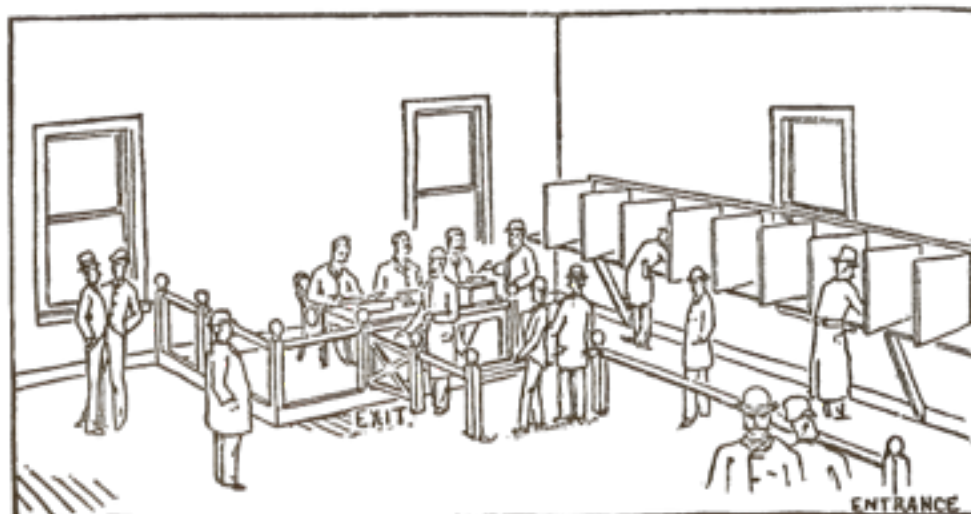
¹³³ "Both Parties For Reform: The Australian System Indorsed (sic) In Harlem," *New York Times*, February 9, 1890, 2.

¹³⁴ Letter from Nathan Matthews Jr., Chairman, Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee, to T.S. Williams, April 1, 1890, Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, Box 1-129-H-5, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations.

Matthews' letters had one goal: to convince Hill that signing the Saxton Bill would be to his and his party's benefit. Massachusetts had adopted ballot secrecy in 1888, the first state in the nation to do so, thus Matthews' opinion on the benefits the Democratic Party had derived from it were of great interest to the Governor.¹³⁵ The description of the Massachusetts ballot law that Matthews gave to Williams, and thus presumably to Hill, detailed the problems of partial voting and illiterate disfranchisement while also emphasizing the advantages that secrecy offered to Democrats in particular. Matthews was certain that "the ballot act did keep voters away from the polls, particularly those who could not read," estimating that this may have cost the party 2,000 votes in Boston alone. It may also, he noted, have convinced men who were not confident readers to stay home rather than face the "gauntlet of the official ballot" and risk embarrassment if they were unable to figure out how to vote on their own.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Because he was describing internal party strategies, Matthews twice emphasized that his correspondent "consider this letter entirely confidential." Even still there were some considerations he evidently did not feel comfortable putting on paper. In his March 21 letter, Matthews briefly mentioned that he saw in the proposed Saxton Bill "several objections of a practical kind" but was unwilling to detail them. "If you could get over here I would explain things more effectively," he wrote, and concluded with his standard call for confidentiality. Letter from Nathan Matthews Jr., Chairman, Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee, to T.S. Williams, March 21, 1890, Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, Box 1-129-H-5, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations. For more on Matthews see: Robert A. Silverman, "Nathan Matthews: Politics of Reform in Boston, 1890-1910," *The New England Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1977): 626-43.

¹³⁶ Letter from Nathan Matthews Jr., Chairman, Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee, to T.S. Williams, March 14, 1890, Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, Box 1-129-H-5, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations.



POLLING-PLACE UNDER BALLOT REFORM.

The illustration shows the proposed system of voting in operation. The voter entering the polling-place has already received from the proper officer a single ballot, on which are plainly printed the various officials to be voted for and the candidates for each office, with the parties they represent. Passing behind the railing at the point marked "Entrance," the voter enters one of the booths, where he finds full instructions posted, and there arranges his ballot, placing a cross against the name of each candidate he votes for. He then passes to the ballot-box, depositing his vote in the presence of the inspectors of election, and passes out at the gate marked "Exit."

Figure 6.3: Graphic included in the frontispiece of the Society for Political Education's 1889 tract on *Electoral Reform* depicting a polling place operating under the recently enacted Massachusetts law and the proposed Saxton Bill.¹³⁷

Counterbalancing all of these problems, however, was the considerable advantage of secrecy. "I think we are all agreed," Matthews wrote, that the new system of voting constituted "a vast improvement so far as the quiet, secrecy and freedom from annoyance are concerned." He then quickly pivoted to what he knew was the only consideration on Governor Hill's mind, the effect on the Democratic vote. Matthews emphasized that "the element of absolute secrecy of

¹³⁷ *Electoral Reform*, np, pre-title page.

voting helped us materially in the last election."¹³⁸ Matthews sought to convince Hill that the secret ballot's ability to let workingmen vote Democratic without fear of economic retaliation was well worth its cumbersome machinery and suppression of illiterate votes. In its substance this was the same argument that labor and reform organizations had been making to Hill for over a year. Yet, their entreaties emphasized the positive effects of ballot secrecy on the independence and manhood of New York's workingmen. Noble as they were, these sentiments were unlikely to move the hand of as dedicated and ambitious a partisan as Hill. Especially if there was a chance that reform would endanger his political future. Matthews, as both an Democratic campaigner and an early promoter of ballot secrecy, was ideally positioned to pitch the secret ballot to Hill in the only language that the ambitious governor understood—partisanship.

Despite Matthews' counsel, however, Hill again vetoed the Saxton Bill. This time he prefaced his veto with a request that the legislature request an official opinion from the New York Court of Appeals, the state's highest judicial body, on the constitutionality of the bill's provisions. Williams sent a copy of the veto message to Matthews, who replied tactfully that "I do not feel certain about the soundness of the constitutional argument." Matthews—an attorney by trade—did find Hill's political objections to be "generally well taken," but acknowledged that

¹³⁸ In a handwritten note at the end of the letter Matthews acknowledged that Hill had a tough decision to make because he was facing "difficulties which do not present themselves in Massachusetts." He did not elaborate on those difficulties but certainly Republican control of the legislature and the power of machines like Tammany would have been among them. Letter from Nathan Matthews Jr., Chairman, Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee, to T.S. Williams, March 14, 1890, Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, Box 1-129-H-5, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations.

they were unlikely to convince the general public.¹³⁹ The veto made national news. In Iowa, the state house Democrats voted unanimously for an Australian ballot bill with the explicit intent of "repudiat[ing] that act of Gov. Hill."¹⁴⁰

Matthews' lack of enthusiasm for Hill's third attempt to evade the issue of ballot reform was shared by virtually the entire state.¹⁴¹ And when the defections came from the ranks of organized labor they spoke loudly. The *Tribune* rushed reporters to the headquarters of the Central Labor Union as soon as the veto was announced. The subheading of the article, "Workingmen Will Vote Solidly Against Him," summed up organized labor's anger at Hill's third veto. The leader of a local Assembly of the Knights of Labor mused that if the Saxton Bill could not become law while Hill was Governor then he doubted his prospects for reelection. Representatives of the Cigarmakers, Typographical, and International Unions all mentioned proudly that they were planning to adopt or had already put into action voting systems for their unions based on the premises of the Saxton Bill.¹⁴²

Hill knew he could not afford to lose labor support. As the *Tribune* ironically put it a few weeks after his third veto: "popular indignation... may yet coerce him" into signing a strong

¹³⁹ Letter from Nathan Matthews Jr., Chairman, Executive Committee of the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee, to T.S. Williams, April 1, 1890, Timothy Shaler Williams Papers, Box 1-129-H-5, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations. The ever-critical *Tribune* felt similarly, commenting that "the pretence is a dishonest one." "The Veto of the Saxton Bill," *New-York Tribune*, April 1, 1890, 6.

¹⁴⁰ "Gov. Hill Condemned.: The Iowa House Passes A Secret Ballot Bill," *New York Times*, April 9, 1890, 1.

¹⁴¹ A select few supported him. A former State Engineer wrote to thank Hill for his "able and courageous veto" of the Saxton Bill. Letter from John D. Van Buren, Jr. to David B. Hill, May 14, 1890, MssCol 1396, Box 1, David B. Hill Papers, Letters, 1887-1891, NYPL Rare Books and Manuscripts Division.

¹⁴² "The Governor Denounced: Workingmen Will Vote Solidly Against Him," *New-York Tribune*, April 2, 1890, 3. Their reactions should not have been surprising; a few days earlier the Central Labor Union passed an official resolution endorsing the Saxton bill and denouncing Hill by name. "Corruption," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), May 31, 1890, 3.

secret ballot bill.¹⁴³ Organized labor's reaction to his third veto finally convinced Hill that his attempt to enact ballot secrecy without an official ballot could both endanger labor support and tie him tightly in the public mind to the corruption of political machines. Hill had also come around to Matthews' argument that ballot secrecy could potentially secure Democrats more votes from otherwise coerced workingmen than they would lose from illiterate voters driven from the polls by the new ballot's requirements. In the Spring of 1890 he gave in and signed the fourth iteration of the Saxton Bill that had been sent to his desk.

The Secret and Official Ballot

The argument over ballot reform that labor leaders and Republican and Democratic legislators had carried on with the governor for three years came to an end with the enactment of both compulsory secrecy and an official ballot in May 1890.¹⁴⁴ The pressure of the economic voter intimidation issue forced Hill to sign into law a version of the Saxton Bill that significantly undermined party and machine control of the ballot. In the end, the political pressure in favor of ballot secrecy was so great that even Tammany Hall endorsed the new law in an "eloquent"

¹⁴³ "New Saxton Bill Passed," *New-York Tribune*, 23 April 1890, 1.

In mid-April, in the midst of the Saxton fight, the legislature passed and the governor signed an update to the anti-intimidation law that explicitly outlawed "any employer... to put up or otherwise exhibit in his factory, work-shop or other establishment... any hand-bill or placard containing any threat, notice or information that in case any particular ticket or candidate shall be elected, work in his place or establishment will cease... or other threats express or implied, intended or calculated to influence the political opinions or actions of his employees." "Money in Elections," *The Watertown Herald* (Watertown, NY), April 19, 1890, 5.

¹⁴⁴ One example of how closely New Yorkers were following the Saxton Bill fight after three long years of conflict: in the midst of the special one page "Evening Baseball Edition" of the *New York World*, stashed beneath scores, standings, play-by-play accounts, and a really odd cartoon that seems to be depicting the profusion of baseball leagues, a brief article describes the passage of the final iteration of the revised Saxton Bill "after prolonged debate." "Again the Saxton Bill," *The Evening World* (New York, NY), April 22, 1890, Baseball Extra, 1.

address against "corruption and intimidation."¹⁴⁵ While Hill claimed in his signing message that he "cheerfully approve[d]" of the new law, there was no concealing that he had lost the long war.¹⁴⁶

The bill that Hill signed signaled a complete victory for advocates of ballot secrecy. It provided for an official ballot, allowing someone to vote for an entire party ticket by simply tearing off the column of nominees he wished to support and placing it in the ballot box. Yet, parties were still permitted to give voters pasters which they could attach to the official ballots on top of any ticket. Hill had preserved the theoretical ability to knife candidates he disliked. But as Congressman Charles Tracey (D-NY) proudly explained to congress the following month, "the vital feature of our New York law is the preservation of secrecy of the ballot."¹⁴⁷ While reform leader William Ivins was disappointed by the clunky design of the new ballots, he considered the law's secrecy provision to be "a long step" towards "gains for the good." Looking back on the 1890 law twenty years after its enactment, Ivins lingered on the advancement that ballot secrecy had made in guaranteeing every man political and economic freedom by "reliev(ing) the workman from the coercion of his employer."¹⁴⁸ Because ballot secrecy had ended for all time the ability of "employers to tell precisely how their employees voted," Ivins saw it as a reform

¹⁴⁵ "Democracy's Surrender to the Ballot Reformers," *New-York Tribune*, May 2, 1890, 6.

¹⁴⁶ "Reform Won Against Odds," *New York Times*, May 3, 1890, 1; "Hill's Eyes Open," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 3, 1890, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Congressman Tracey, on the Federal Election Law, on June 30, 1890, 51st Congress, 1st Session, *Congressional Record-House* 6780.

¹⁴⁸ Ivins, "on Electoral Reform," 241, 280.

"of the greatest importance." The secret ballot's abolition of economic voter intimidation constituted "a very general liberation of the workingmen" from "intolerable coercion."¹⁴⁹

Labor leaders expressed tentative support for the compromise bill after its passage but worried about its shortcomings and their loss of a potent political issue. A convention of fifty labor organizers met at Cooper Union in August to endorse a platform that called for "the improvement of the secret ballot system lately introduced, so that every man may become able to own his own vote."¹⁵⁰ After years of advocacy they were still demanding the perfection of a system of voting to protect their members' political rights. That same month, Mr. Curley, a Knights of Labor leader, expressed concern in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* that the paster ballot method would reopen the door to workplace intimidation. What if, he speculated, the "owner of a factory or the briber of a gang" marched his men near to the polls and made sure that they voted the boss' desired paster ballot by forcing them to turn out their pockets outside the polls? While Curley's concern was a bit farfetched, it did reflect the widespread discontent within organized labor about the compromises that had gone into the bill.¹⁵¹

The Central Labor Union, however, was delighted with the fight's finale. The increased publicity for small parties promised by the official ballot, coupled with the "opportunity for a secret ballot" convinced the party to run a ticket in the next election. Connecting the new reform to its inciting incident, *The Evening Post* reported that "the labor men claim that the secret ballot

¹⁴⁹ Ivins, "on Electoral Reform," 280. The *Times* agreed, thanks to the new law "intimidation is made absolutely impossible." "Reform Won Against Odds," *New York Times*, May 3, 1890, 1.

¹⁵⁰ "The Nationalists: Second Meeting of their Conference," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), August 16, 1890, 1.

¹⁵¹ Curley, "The New York Ballot Law," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), August 2, 1890, 546.

will enable them to make a stronger showing than they did in the Henry George campaign" of 1886. Absent the "intimidation of laboring men" in previous elections, independent labor candidacies stood a good chance of success. The *Post* speculated that the new ticket would draw voters away from the Democrats.¹⁵²

A viable labor third party movement as a result of ballot secrecy was Governor Hill's worst nightmare. He had sought to weave a middle course between the political machines and labor and had ended up alienating elements of both groups. In particular, Hill had hoped that the addition in the final bill of a provision guaranteeing workingmen two fully paid hours off to cast their ballot would endear him to labor. Yet the *Workmen's Advocate* denounced the "hollowness of the boon" in extensive detail. The paper dwelled on the power dynamic between workingmen and their employers. Because workers were required to request time off twenty-four hours before election day, rapacious capitalists would have every opportunity to quietly discharge anyone who made such a request.¹⁵³

¹⁵² "Early Political Activity," *The Evening Post* (New York, NY), May 28, 1890, 5.

¹⁵³ The *Workmen's Advocate* mused on what would happen if one of the lowly "L" train employees of New York City, who made \$1.25 a day and "behind each of whom there surely stands a line of applicants at least twelve deep," asked Jay Gould for two hours off to vote. "Why, certainly," the imaginary Gould would remark, "you can have your two hours; you are a sovereign citizen; your rights of suffrage shall not be curtailed." Incidentally, however, Gould would remark that he "meant since last week to tell you that your services won't be needed at the end of your week," but "by all means cast your vote." The paper concluded that the Republican and Democratic parties were too corrupt to trust, despite the new ballot law. The only choice for laboring men was to organize and vote for true labor candidates like those of the Socialistic Labor Party. D.L., "Communications: Sops that are not even Sops," *Workmen's Advocate* (New Haven, CT), May 24, 1890, 3. Employers' desire to circumvent the time off to vote provision of the new law was demonstrated just a few weeks after its enactment when the Matteawan Manufacturing Company wrote to the Attorney-General to ask if the provision was constitutional. The Attorney-General responded that he would enforce the law and charge employers with a misdemeanor for keeping their employees from the polls. Yet, the fact that a large employer sought to challenge the provision so quickly and publicly suggests that the skepticism of the *Workmen's Advocate* was well earned. "The Attorney-General on the Saxton Bill," *The Sun* (New York, NY), June 4, 1890, 7. *The Sun* argued that this provision violated the constitution's protection of contract rights between employer and employee. "The Wages of Voters on Election Day," *The Sun* (New York, NY), November 18, 1890, 6.

The new ballot law received its first test in the 1890 midterm elections. Reports were generally favorable, though some voters struggled to understand the complex secret ballot system and some illiterate men were barred from the polls entirely.¹⁵⁴ Even skeptical labor advocates like Mr. Curley, the Knights of Labor who had doubted the effectiveness of the new law over the summer, came to appreciate its protections after witnessing its first trial. While he worried that indifferent voters could still be bribed to stay home, he enthused that there was no means for employers to trace the ballot cast back to the voter. Thus, under the new system "intimidation utterly fails."¹⁵⁵ Hill, too, had reason to be pleased with the operation of the new secret ballot law. The 1890 midterms marked a national repudiation of the Republican program. The McKinley Tariff and the noble but failed Federal Elections Bill sparked an electoral backlash that swept Democrats into power in both the U.S. House of Representatives and in the New York Assembly. The nationwide Democratic tilt of the election makes any assessment of the partisan effects of the new ballot law difficult, but in the short term Hill had no reason to second guess his surrender on the ballot issue.¹⁵⁶

One of the central arguments in support of ballot secrecy that labor leaders—and eventually some Democratic politicians—made to Hill was that secrecy would free coerced

¹⁵⁴ "How Votes Will Be Cast," *New York Times*, November 2, 1890, 12, "The Secret Ballot," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), November 5, 1890, 1, and "First Trial of the Secret Ballot," *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), September 10, 1890, 1.

¹⁵⁵ Curley, "A Knight of Labor on the New York Ballot Law," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, NY), January 3, 1891, 406.

¹⁵⁶ Bass, *I am a Democrat*, 164. The 1891 state election, while also a success for the Democrats, was marred by substantial problems with the ballot law. Hill and his allies exploited problems in the ballot design to flip three state senate seats and capture the chamber. "The Steal of the Senate," as it was quickly dubbed, provoked a backlash that, along with several other missteps by Hill in 1892, drove him out of the presidential nomination contest before it even began. Bass, *I am a Democrat*, 195-6 and Foley, *Ballot Battles*, 179-190, 426-note 3.

workingmen to follow their natural instincts and vote Democratic. Hill received reassurance shortly after the 1890 election that this argument had been correct from a Jamestown, New York, lawyer, newspaper editor, and minor Democratic activist named Hiram C. Clark. Clark was a bit of an eccentric and wrote to Hill's secretary twice in one day shortly after the election. His first letter recounted the election results in his small town, but he wrote again because he suddenly realized that he had "omitted to state the very important advantage democrats have acquired by the adoption of the free new ballot system." Clark explained that "it has been the custom in these parts for employers to dictate the votes of their employees... Employees found if there was curtailment owing to a surplus of hired labour it so happened that democrats were discharged while republicans were retained." Yet the new protections had wrought a change in the political expression of Jamestown's workingmen. "Under the improved method," Clark claimed, "a notable change was distinctly observed in our city last tuesday... working men walked proudly into the reserved stalls and voted as lord of their own suffrage" under the protection of the new election law. Though he waited until the last possible moment to finally roll the dice, Hill's gamble that ballot secrecy would win him more support from labor than the official ballot would lose him from the machine vote seems to have paid off.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Clark's post-election letter was one in a series of somewhat odd messages he sent to Williams. While the tone of the letters is friendly and Williams marked them "personal," Clark did not suggest he had any particular connection to the governor or his secretary. He addressed his first letter to "Mr. Williams, Priv. Sec? My Dear Sir." His one request for a political favor—an appointment as superintendent of a hospital for disappointed Republicans—was probably a joke. Hiram C. Clark to Timothy Shaler Williams, private secretary to Gov David B. Hill, November 7, 1890. Timothy Shaler Williams Collection. Box 1, Correspondence. Manuscripts and Archives Division. New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations.

Clark's letter also spoke to another concern that had animated much of the debate over ballot secrecy in New York: the effect of economic voter intimidation on the independence and manhood of workingmen. Clark argued that economic voter intimidation had posed as serious a threat to American freedom and equality as had slavery. Workingmen, he believed, regarded the secret ballot "as a second proclamation of Emancipation from 'Bossism.'" Ballot secrecy returned workingmen to a state of political independence and implicitly restored their whiteness and the political privileges it contained. Clark also argued that ballot secrecy had restored workingmen's manly strength, noting that they "felt they had grown several inches in their own self-esteem" by being able to vote free of coercion. The fight over ballot reform in New York had featured a constellation of advocacy groups, political parties, and politicians pursuing different and often conflicting agendas. Yet, as Clark's letter demonstrated, when all the other arguments had been tried, it was the reality of economic voter intimidation that finally compelled Governor Hill to write ballot reform in the books of law.¹⁵⁸

Conclusion

Economic voter intimidation dominated the debate over ballot reform from the very start in Connecticut, and it was a core issue driving the debate in New York. In both states, national and local unions and leftist political parties pushed to keep strong ballot secrecy provisions in

¹⁵⁸ Clark closed by emphasizing the positive effect the new law had had on the local Democratic vote and with a presumably jocular suggestion that the best way to permanently "secure liberty to voters" would be to arrest and confine factory owners and their agents while the polls were open on election day. Hiram C. Clark to Timothy Shaler Williams, private secretary to Gov David B. Hill, November 7, 1890. Timothy Shaler Williams Collection. Box 1, Correspondence. Manuscripts and Archives Division. New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations.

each proposed bill. The governors of both states forced reformers to compromise on critical elements of their bills. In Connecticut ballot secrecy was preserved at the cost of a fully official ballot, while in New York ballot secrecy and an official ballot came into existence in 1890 but the form of the ballot required substantial revision over the next twenty years before it approached the ideal of the Australian system. Economic voter intimidation was not merely one contributor to the successful campaign for secret ballot reforms in these critical states. The practical enactment of ballot secrecy was possible only through the strenuous campaigning of labor and reform advocates who believed it was a necessary reform to combat the threat that economic voter intimidation posed to American democracy.

By the 1892 federal election, more than thirty states had enacted secret ballot laws.¹⁵⁹ While the passage of ballot secrecy was far from easy in the states that followed, opposition declined as states demonstrated the practicality and advantages of the new system. Ballot laws were written, opposed, vetoed, and signed by Republicans and Democrats. No party could claim exclusive ownership of the reform but they all eventually embraced its capacity to protect dependent voters. As the wave of reform crested, organized labor began to view ballot secrecy as a non-negotiable stance for their political allies.¹⁶⁰ Workers and political observers raved about

¹⁵⁹ Reynolds and McCormick, "Outlawing 'Treachery'," 849.

¹⁶⁰ For example, the labor organizations of Indiana gathered in 1893 to angrily protest against the appointment of a United States Attorney who had opposed "the Australian ballot law." The meeting expressed its disgust that Democratic president Grover Cleveland, who had vocally supported ballot secrecy during his interregnum, would appoint any man to high office who had opposed it. To organized labor, opposition to the secret ballot was entirely disqualifying. "Untitled," *The American Nonconformist* (Indianapolis, IN), March 30, 1893, 8.

the "great advance" that ballot secrecy had made in their states in preventing employers from intimidating their employees.¹⁶¹ The crisis of coercion seemed to have abated.

¹⁶¹ "Hope For A Clean Sweep: Democrats Of New-Hampshire Mean To Win This Year," *New York Times*, July 6, 1892, 8, "The Practical Working Of The Australian Ballot Law In A Great City," *Belford's Monthly*, September 1892; 9, 52, "Ballot Reform In Delaware.: Different Systems Proposed To The Legislature," *New York Times*, February 23, 1891, 5. Said one well known citizen in New Jersey: "Employers cannot now intimidate their workmen, and every man can vote in accordance with his conscientious convictions." "The Australian Law: It Worked Like A Charm In New Jersey—Bribers Baffled," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 19, 1890, 1.

Chapter Seven: "Employees Everywhere Are Being Intimidated:"¹ The Presidential Election Campaign of 1896

"Are you Men?

Are you men with conscience or shame

That your souls can be bought for a song?

Are you cowards that dare not proclaim

That you stand for the right against wrong?

Are you slaves that you aid to defeat

The foes of the gold-gutted host?

Are you dogs that you fawn at the feet

Of the men that have spurned you the most?"

"Are You Men?," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), November 7, 1896, 13.

In early October of 1896, Dugald Crawford, the eponymous proprietor of Crawford's Grand Dry Goods Palace in St. Louis, Missouri, was frustrated with some of his employees. Crawford was known as something of an "autocrat," and as the nation plunged into a depression in the mid-1890s and radical proposals for currency devaluation grew in popularity, his autocratic tendencies expanded from business to politics. When he discovered that some of his employees were planning to vote for William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic nominee for president who had staked his campaign on the unlimited coinage of silver, Crawford angrily

¹ "The Citizen's Duty," from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (daily circulation in 1895: 43,810) in the *Hartford Weekly Herald* (Hartford KY), October 14, 1896, 2 (weekly, 1,800). Newspaper circulation numbers for the previous year will be given, when available, the first time each newspaper is mentioned in this chapter. Source: Lord & Thomas, *Newspaper Advertising, Lord & Thomas' Pocket Directory for 1894-5: Complete list of newspapers, magazines and periodicals in the United States and Canada, omitting such as do not insert advertisements* (Chicago: Blakely & Rogers, Printers and Binders, 1895). <https://books.google.com/books?id=OkEwAQAAMAAJ&lpg=PA507&ots=s6vumGpClu&dq=the%20penny%20press%20minneapolis%20newspaper&pg=PA194#v=onepage&q=the%20penny%20press%20minneapolis%20newspaper&f=false>.

declared that "he didn't want any anarchists under his roof." He gathered the twelve offenders he knew about in his office and fired them.²

The community backlash was swift. There was a "rapid falling off of business" as the men and women of St. Louis stayed away from the store. Local labor unions made Crawford a topic of conversation at their regular meetings and Crawford's perfidy was debated on the streets of St. Louis "almost to the exclusion of other topics." Chastened, Crawford bowed to "the overwhelming strength of public opinion" the very next day and begged his discharged employees to come back to work. It was much too late. Stories of economic voter intimidation had been spreading nationwide for months, and the attention of the nation focused on Crawford's "aggravated" example. The story of Crawford's coercion appeared in newspapers from Boston to Los Angeles. Backed by thousands of dollars in donations from angry workingmen and Democratic leaders, the central committee of the Missouri Democratic Party brought criminal charges against Crawford for illegally interfering with employees in the exercise of their political rights. The case was eventually dismissed on a technicality, but the sight of the millionaire Crawford in handcuffs for coercing his employees brought home to wage working men across

² "Coercion Will Not Work," *Denver Evening Post*, October 14, 1896, 4, "Fired Silver Men," *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 13, 1896, 1 (daily: 21,400).

the nation that their bosses might try to coerce them into voting against Bryan.³ For the remainder of the campaign, Democratic newspapers would invoke "the brutal conduct of Mr. Crawford in St. Louis" as evidence that economic voter intimidation was a threat to American democracy.⁴ Employer intimidation of employees became such an omnipresent concern during the 1896 campaign that newspapers and politicians narrowed their usage of the word "coercion," which previously covered all manner of threats, solely to refer to incidents of economic intimidation.

Crawford's case attracted exceptional coverage, but similar accounts propagated in newspapers during the Summer and Fall of 1896. It is difficult in retrospect to determine the trustworthiness of individual reports of employer coercion. But the remarkable number of similar accusations that emerged from the Democratic press, and the equal number of refutations and challenges from the Republican press, show that concerns about coercion during the 1896

³ "A St. Louis Sensation," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1896, 1 (daily: 12,708) "Silver Men Discharged," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 12, 1896, 7, "Will Fight the Case," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 13, 1896, 3 (daily: 177,309), "For Intimidation: St. Louis Millionaire is Under Arrest," *Boston Daily Globe*, October 15, 1896, 4, "Discharged Free-Silver Men," *New York Times* (daily: 60,000), October 13, 1896, 3, "Discharge of Clerks," *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD) (daily: 66,980), October 13, 1896, 2, "Smartness: May Send Him To Prison," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 13, 1896, 6 (daily: 71,000), "Coercion Will Not Work," *Denver Evening Post*, October 14, 1896, 4, "Regrets His Haste," *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1896, 1, "Cured of His Folly," *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA) (daily: 7,000), October 15, 1896, 4, "Manly and Honest Confession," *The Washington Post*, October 17, 1896, 6 (daily: 24,317), "Crawford's Case Continued," *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 23, 1896, 1, "Crawford's Coercion Not Proved," *New York Times*, October 29, 1896, 6.

⁴ "Appeal to Labor Men, Their Chicago Brothers Ask Them to Unite for Bryan, A Word on Hanna's Coercion," *The Brooklyn Citizen* (Brooklyn, NY), October 29, 1896, 3 (daily: 25,000). Republished as: "Patriotic Appeal of Organized Workmen to the Producers of the Mississippi Valley," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), October 29, 1896, np (daily: 12,000). "The Crawford coercion case" even featured in post-election coverage. The Kansas City, Missouri, *Times* was quoted in *Public Opinion* the day after the election discussing the case as an example that "workingmen need nobody to tell them that many employers tried by every means in their power to coerce them." "The Result of the National Election," *Public Opinion* (Washington, D.C), November 5, 1896, Volume XXI, No. 19, 3-4 (weekly: 23,140), One Republican paper claimed that "the instance... of the St. Louis man" was the only documented example of coercion during the campaign. "Untitled," *The Record-Union* (Sacramento, CA), October 28, 1896, 2 (daily: 6,658).

campaign were widespread. As the *Denver Evening Post* explained in its description of Crawford's ill-fated effort, both coercion itself and "the reactionary effect which follows coercion," had become the "most important element of the Republican national campaign." The election of 1896 is remembered primarily as a critical realigning election fought over the issue of currency standards. It was also, as the *Post* put it, a struggle over "the general principle that every American citizen is a freeman with [the] inherent right to cast his vote as he pleases."⁵ Widespread newspaper coverage of incidents of employers intimidating their employees meant that the presidential election of 1896 was a referendum on whether concentrated economic power inherently posed a threat to universal manhood suffrage and American democracy.

The reemergence of coercion as a major campaign issue in the 1896 presidential campaign between William McKinley (R-OH) and William Jennings Bryan (D-NE) should have been a surprise to contemporaries. The ballot reform movement, detailed in chapters five and six, had as one of its primary goals the abolition of economic voter intimidation through the passage of compulsory ballot secrecy laws. This movement was so successful that by 1896 approximately ninety-two percent of voters lived in states that mandated ballot secrecy.⁶ Reports of economic coercion had declined precipitously in the years since voting in secret had become the norm in every region but the Deep South.⁷ Workingmen still sometimes accused their bosses of unduly

⁵ "Coercion Will Not Work," *Denver Evening Post*, October 14, 1896, 4.

⁶ William D. Harpine, *From the Front Porch to the Front Page: McKinley and Bryan in the 1896 Presidential Campaign*, 1st ed. Presidential Rhetoric Series; No. 13 (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005), 20.

⁷ As did reports of all kinds of voter targeted electoral malfeasance. Not coincidentally, the incidence of election fraud after ballots had been cast—corruption in the count—increased dramatically. Didi Kuo and Jan Teorell, "Illicit Tactics as Substitutes: Election Fraud, Ballot Reform, and Contested Congressional Elections in the United States, 1860-1930," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 5 (April 2017): 665–96, 667, 684.

influencing their votes, and newspapers traded partisan accusations of intimidation and bribery, but the rhetoric of a crisis of economic voter intimidation had cooled to a dull murmur.⁸ As a Minnesota paper put it in 1894, "every voter... rich or poor, employer or employee," should feel confident using the secret ballot, because "when he stands in the voting booth no human eye can detect his action, no human power can read his mind."⁹ The secret ballot was designed to block the chain of information between an employer, his employee, and that employee's ballot. Yet in 1896, employers who were terrified about what Bryan's victory could mean for American capitalism and their own fortunes developed new coercive techniques and expanded on old methods to circumvent the secret ballot's protections.

Scholars have described nearly every element of the campaign and election of 1896 in exacting detail. They have typically treated coercion, however, as a secondary issue. Historians and political scientists almost always described coercion in 1896 in the introductions and conclusions of their books, typically in the context of assessing the impact of coercion and other

⁸ In 1894 the Delaware law firm Robert G. Harman and Associates advertised in local papers that it would "vigorously prosecute all complaints lodged with them" if officers of corporations tried to intimidate their employees. As the firm's founder explained: "every employee should have the privilege of exercising the elective franchise without fear of discharge from his employment." "Untitled," *Evening Journal* (Wilmington, DE), July 28, 1894, 2 (daily: 6,000).

⁹ "The Penny Press Ticket," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), November 5, 1894, 4.

methods of electoral fraud and intimidation on the results of the election.¹⁰ They generally concluded that Democrats concocted the coercion issue in an effort to win the election or to excuse losing it. William D. Harpine, for instance, argued in his 2005 study of the rhetoric of the campaign that Bryan knew the secret ballot made coercion impossible. Bryan, Harpine alleged, used allegations of Republican economic voter intimidation to rally reluctant industrial laborers to support his campaign.¹¹ R. Hal Williams, in his otherwise excellent 2010 book on the campaign, argued that Democrats' allegations were primarily an ex-post facto rationalization for

¹⁰ Stern and Josephson described coercion as having a "significant effect upon the outcome of the election." Josephson, a prominent muckraking journalist, took seriously Bryan's accusations and explained the back and forth between Chairmen Jones and Hanna in late October in great detail. Clarence A. Stern, *Resurgent Republicanism: The Handiwork of Hanna* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1963), 27-8, Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos, 1865-1896*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), 702-5. More modern scholars have given less attention to the topic. Historian Michael Kazin's 2006 biography of Bryan mentioned coercion only twice—once during his description of Bryan's Chicago Labor Day speech and a second time at the very end of his chapter on the election. In that concluding section Kazin explained that while coercion was a "routine" element of the political system at the time, in retrospect it was "impossible to prove more than a handful of these charges—or to conclude that they would have altered the result." Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 69, 78-9. Historian LeRoy Ashby treated coercion similarly in his 1987 biography of Bryan. Only in the last four pages of his chapter on the election of 1896, after he parsed the election results, did he mention coercion. While he acknowledged that "his charges were not unfounded," and described several examples of employer coercion, he emphasized that "such a conspiratorial interpretation of the election consoled Bryan and his supporters," but probably did not substantially influence the election results. LeRoy Ashby, *William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 67-8.

¹¹ Harpine, *From the Front Porch*, 14-20.

their defeat. He described Bryan's invocation of coercion during the campaign as an excuse of the kind that was "understandably attractive to losing candidates."¹²

Historians also dismissed the significance of economic intimidation in the North by comparing it to the pervasive and violent intimidation of African Americans by Democrats in the South in the same election. Williams argued that employer coercion in the North was balanced out electorally and morally by intimidation which took place "even more criminally, against hundreds of thousands of African Americans in the South."¹³ Harpine described disfranchisement in the South as "perhaps even more important in swaying key states" than coercion.¹⁴ Bryan biographer Michael Kazin argued that these forms of coercion "may have balanced out."¹⁵ And historian Charles Calhoun claimed that the electoral effect of northern coercion "paled next to the benefit" that Democrats derived from southern disfranchisement.¹⁶ This approach uncomfortably echoed Democratic arguments in the 1870s and 1880s that Republican coercion of northern laborers justified their predations on black voters in the South. Arguing that a crime is not

¹² R. Hal Williams, *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896*, American Presidential Elections, (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 150-1. Williams' book is the main source for Richard White's coverage of the election in his 2017 Oxford History of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. White drew on Williams to describe how the protections of the secret ballot rendered coercion less effective than it had previously been: "Employers did try to coerce workers, who in rallies in the Northeastern and Midwestern cities had shown enthusiasm for Bryan. At a Cleveland counter rally to the Republican flag day, marchers covered their faces. They carried a banner saying 'we cover our faces for fear of losing our jobs.' There is no doubt employers threatened economic retribution—closing factories, laying off workers, and more—in the case of a Bryan victory, but such threats were not new, and given the high turnout and the secret ballot in most of the North probably not particularly effective." Richard White, *The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 836-849.

¹³ Williams, *Realigning America*, 151.

¹⁴ Harpine, *From the Front Porch*, 20-1.

¹⁵ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 78.

¹⁶ Charles W. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 165.

meaningful because a worse crime took place elsewhere is a flawed approach to both crimefighting and history.

This chapter argues that fear was at the core of how Americans processed the events of the 1896 campaign and election. The destructive economic Panic of 1893 left employers fearful that capitalism itself was at risk. It drove millions of wage workers into poverty and hunger and convinced millions more that they had to do whatever they could to hold onto their jobs. In that context, many employers saw Bryan and the economic revolution he promised as an existential threat to their businesses and the nation. As the anti-Bryan Chicago *Inter Ocean* newspaper explained during the campaign, businessmen had not worried "that the election of Cleveland would precipitate a panic," yet it had.¹⁷ And now Bryan offered class conflict and currency devaluation as the solution to the hard times. In their fear, these men exploited their economic power over precarious employees to convince them to oppose Bryan. Because of the secret ballot, however, employers could no longer reliably observe and influence the votes of their employees on election day. Instead, they created methods of coercion that focused on employees' political expression during the campaign. Employers aggressively surveyed their workers as to their political leanings, threatened them with pay cuts and factory closings if Bryan won, and forced them to participate in public displays of political affection for McKinley. Because of the context of economic fear in which they were deployed, these methods were generally effective, though they were less reliably suppressive than observing and controlling a voter's ballot at the polls.

¹⁷ "Coercion," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 17, 1896, 12 (daily: 85,184).

The second portion of this chapter argues that coercion played a substantial rhetorical role in the 1896 campaign. While coercion was a real problem, the rhetoric that the two parties used to discuss it took on a life of its own as the problem grew more acute. The same themes of manhood, citizenship, independence, and whiteness that suffused elections before the enactment of the secret ballot dominated the rhetoric of 1896 as well. Democratic and labor newspapers and politicians were quick to popularize allegations of workplace coercion against their political opponents. They emphasized the threat that coercion posed to the stability of American democracy and capitalism. Republican papers and politicians engaged with many of the same themes, however they argued that the mere accusation that workingmen would succumb to coercion was an insult to their manhood and independence. Politicians and papers on both sides concurred that the ability of white wage working men to cast a free ballot was a critical issue for the campaign. The political equality of white workingmen was the bedrock of America's still profoundly unequal experiment with mass democracy. If their votes were absorbed by their bosses, many Americans believed that either democracy would be replaced by plutocracy, or capitalism would be overthrown by a wage workers' revolution and replaced with socialism. Fear of the consequences of widespread economic voter intimidation had driven the enactment of secret ballot laws across much of the country. When workplace coercion returned as a major issue in the 1896 campaign, those same existential fears reemerged as well. Eventually, the issue of coercion became one of the predominant themes in the campaign.

"The Issue Looked Dark and Threatening:" Bryan's Threat to the Wealthy

William Jennings Bryan sought to convince people suffering through an economic calamity that the free coinage of silver currency would solve their woes. The national obsession over gold and silver in 1896 emerged from economic realities. The scarcity of gold generated a deflationary pressure on the American economy, and efforts to add silver to the currency in limited amounts had only heightened speculation and currency instability. In 1893, a decade of expansion concealing severe over-investments and declining exports collapsed into the worst panic in decades. Within the year, 15,000 businesses and 600 banks failed. Contemporary observers calculated that national unemployment stood at between 2 and 3 million, well over 15% of the labor force. Layoffs particularly devastated industrial regions in the Midwest and Northeast. Massachusetts, which produced the most complete data on the crisis, had an unemployment rate of 21.4% in 1895. But even that stark figure understated the extent of the destruction. In some mill districts, 85% of the working population was unemployed at some point during the year.¹⁸

The Democratic Party had the misfortune to hold office when the panic began and so was blamed for its results. "The coming of the Democratic Party to power," one Republican explained in a private letter to New York Governor-elect Levi P. Morton, "converted hundreds of thousands

¹⁸ For data on the Panic and its aftermath see Williams, *Realigning America*, 27-9, Harpine, *From the Front Porch*, 27-28, White, *The Republic*, 802-4, and Matthew Algeo, *The President Is a Sick Man: Wherein the Supposedly Virtuous Grover Cleveland Survives a Secret Surgery at Sea and Vilifies the Courageous Newspaperman Who Dared Expose the Truth*. 1st ed. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011), 10-14. More recently, economists have cast doubt on the more extreme unemployment predictions, though their calculations do still describe a destructive depression. Most notably, in 1994 economist J.R. Vernon calculated a retrospective unemployment rate series that estimated: 1892: 4.33, 1893: 5.51, 1894: 7.73, 1895: 6.46, 1896: 8.19, 1897: 7.54, 1898: 8.01, 1899: 6.20. J.R. Vernon, "Unemployment Rates in Postbellum America: 1869-1899," *Journal of Macroeconomics* 16, no. 4 (1994): 701-14, 710.

of breadwinners into breadbeggars."¹⁹ To combat this claim, and in an effort to make a clean break from unpopular lame duck President Grover Cleveland, many Democrats embraced the cause of free silver.²⁰ One of the leaders of this silver Democratic revival was William Jennings Bryan, a young and relatively obscure congressman from Nebraska who was one of the many Democrats who wisely chose not to run for reelection in 1894. Bryan's eloquence in support of silver coinage in congress made him a national figure and a leader in the silver movement.²¹

Expecting victory against their divided and unpopular opponents, the Republicans nominated Ohio Governor William McKinley for president. McKinley owed his easy victory at the convention to the able assistance of industrialist Mark Hanna, who set aside his considerable business interests to organize and run the campaign. The Republican platform declared the party to be "unalterably opposed to every measure calculated to debase our currency or impair the credit of our country."²² By staking out an unrepentantly pro-gold position, McKinley alienated the small faction of silver-Republicans who were not mollified by the platform's hesitant endorsement of international bimetallism, but he hoped to more than make up their loss by

¹⁹ George S. Winbucts to Levi P. Morton, Private letter, November 7, 1894, Levi P. Morton Papers, Box 3, NYPL, Manuscripts and Archives Division.

²⁰ Cleveland unintentionally propelled this process by framing the repeal of the Silver Purchase Act, which allowed for the introduction of a limited amount of silver to federal currency, as an economic panacea. Williams, *Realigning America*, 31-2, Harpine, *From the Front Porch*, 30. Even after the 1896 election the repeal of the silver purchase act still resonated in business circles. In a speech to the New York Chamber of Commerce, Postmaster-General William L. Wilson referred to the repeal as "the only piece of really sound financial legislation" passed in the last thirty years. He received extensive applause. Speech of William L. Wilson, Postmaster-General, Proceedings of the Chamber of Commerce, November 17, 1896, New York Chamber of Commerce and Industry Records, Box 100, Folder 1, Series 2, Vol. 37, 1894-1895 Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

²¹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 38-9, White, *The Republic*, 841. In 1894 he sought to construct a coalition between progressive Democrats and Populists in the Nebraska legislature to promote him to the Senate. While he did not succeed in that extremely Republican year, his Democratic/Populist Senate campaign laid the groundwork for what was to come. Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 42.

²² Williams, *Realigning America*, 61.

appealing to economically conservative Democrats if their convention chose a pro-silver candidate. The platform firmly positioned the Republican Party as the party of industry, finance, and those with money in the bank.

The silverite forces had the upper hand in the Democratic Party's convention in Chicago in July 1896. They had the anger and enthusiasm of the people behind them and the goldbugs in the party, still a substantial faction, had the considerable disadvantage of being associated with Cleveland. The Democratic Party's transformation during the convention from a bastion of limited government conservatism into what many businessmen perceived as an instrument of revolutionary class warfare shaped how those men responded to its challenge. As historian Michael Kazin explained, most politicians in the Gilded Age framed elections as existential conflicts that could result in calamity if their opponents triumphed. 1896 was the first time since the Civil War that many Americans took literally and seriously the rhetoric that they were "battling for the fate of the nation."²³ For the goldbugs who left the convention in disgust to form their own party, for Republicans who had tied their personal and political fortunes to the gold standard, and for the well to do who had rarely involved themselves in politics, William Jennings Bryan's speech to the convention that catapulted him to the nomination contained the seeds of revolution.

In what was to become one of the most famous speeches in American political history, Bryan told the convention that the United States of America was in the midst of a war between

²³ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 46.

the wealthy elite and "the struggling masses."²⁴ This was a war, he explained, which the masses had been losing for some time. Bryan promised to reverse the tide of that ongoing conflict, to "raise up the man who is employed for wages... the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day." He claimed that he did not seek to wage "a war of conquest," merely to protect the homes and families of the laborers of the nation. Yet, Bryan explicitly placed the wealthy elite beyond the protection of the Constitution when he remarked that a man who was unwilling to share his wealth with the less fortunate was "unworthy to enjoy the blessings of a government like ours."²⁵ This was no abstract debate. Bryan charged the gold standard with having already "slain its tens of thousands" of desperate Americans by driving them from work or from their fields.²⁶ Against McKinley's embrace of the gold standard, the animated Nebraskan invoked "the avenging wrath of an indignant people."²⁷ Horrified opponents read into these phrases a call for the poor to avenge their losses by stripping the rich of their rights. Bryan's nomination the following day meant that "the struggling masses" had found their champion, and "the idle holders of idle capital," as Bryan—quoting conservative Treasury Secretary John G. Carlisle—called them, were terrified.²⁸

The leader of the Democratic goldbug opposition, Senator David B. Hill of New York, had begun his speech to the convention just before Bryan's by explaining "I am a Democrat; but I am not a revolutionist."²⁹ That is exactly what Bryan seemed to be to much of the nation and

²⁴ William Jennings Bryan, *Speeches of William Jennings Bryan* (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1913), 247.

²⁵ Bryan, *Speeches of Bryan*, 243.

²⁶ Bryan, *Speeches of Bryan*, 245.

²⁷ Bryan, *Speeches of Bryan*, 246.

²⁸ Bryan, *Speeches of Bryan*, 247.

²⁹ Williams, *Realigning America*, 82.

especially to the business establishment. Though Bryan's convention speech made him the nominee and proved exceedingly popular in Democratic circles, it also, according to rhetorician William D. Harpine, "featured techniques more typical of radical rhetoric" than of a major party political address. Harpine argued that Bryan's constant invocation of images of war and conflict polarized listeners, forcing them to choose one side of the struggle or another.³⁰ While his radicalism inspired silverites and workingmen, many staunch Democratic voters were turned off. As one example, a few weeks after the convention Washington Helsing, a German-language newspaper publisher and the postmaster general of Chicago, wrote to McKinley to announce he was abandoning the Democratic Party because he could not support the "Chicago platform and the Chicago candidate." Though he still believed in tariff reduction and was not pleased with the Republican Party's stances on religious pluralism, Helsing explained that he believed it was his duty to support McKinley against Bryan in an election that he viewed as "a fight of patriotism

³⁰ Harpine, *From the Front Porch*, 56-9.

against treason."³¹ As the British journal *The National Review* put it, "the employing class was in a great panic" over what Bryan's victory would mean for their fortunes.³²

The representatives of concentrated capital had not been idle in the face of the threat that they believed silver coinage posed to their fortunes. In March, before either party's convention, the New York Chamber of Commerce circulated a memo "To the Commercial Bodies and Business Men of the United States," asking them to unite in a "vigorous" effort to convince both parties to make platform statements in support of the maintenance of the gold standard. The memo emphasized that it was "important to every business man, producer and wage earner" to halt agitation for free silver. For the manufacturers and merchants of the Chamber, the outcome of the Democratic Convention was not merely a disappointment, it was a declaration of war. For

³¹ Washington Hising to William McKinley, July 25, 1896, William McKinley Papers: Series 1, General Correspondence and Related Items-1902; Sept. 6-1897, Feb. 22. 1847. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Image 439. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss322680001/>. McKinley replied with his thanks for Hising's support. William McKinley to Washington Hising, August 4, 1896, William McKinley Papers: Series 2, Letterpress Copybooks-1901; Vol. 88, 1896, June 24-1897, Feb. 25. 1896. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Image 57. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss322680019/>.

³² "Prosperity, Coercion, Advice," *The National Review* (London, UK), December 1896, No. 166, 438. Other Democratic politicians took up Bryan's polarizing rhetoric. One Montana state senator called for working class voters to "furnish the sinews of war" against "the mighty influence and gold of the railroad corporations [and] the coercion of the factory employers." "Anaconda Is In It," *The Anaconda Standard* (Anaconda, MT), August 23, 1896, 2 (daily: 10,345). Newspapers, hungry for conflict, embraced Bryan's combative and often militaristic language. His fiery speeches in upstate New York in late August, for example, garnered the headline in the *San Francisco Call*: "'War! War' Cries Bryan." "'War! War' Cries Bryan," *San Francisco Call* (San Francisco, CA), August 28, 1896, 3. Bryan tried to temper his rhetoric by assuring New Yorkers he advocated for free silver "not to destroy, but to build up" the nation and its people. Yet, the mere fact that he felt the need to clarify that he did not intend to destroy half the country explains why the President of the New York Chamber of Commerce felt justified in describing Bryan's pro-silver rhetoric as raising a "revolutionary issue." The sense of horror with which Orr viewed Bryan's campaign was widely shared. Legendary Kansas journalist William Allen White interpreted Bryan as "an incarnation of demagoguery, the apotheosis of riot, destruction, and carnage." Bryan, *Speeches of Bryan*, 289. Harpine, *From the Front Porch*, 81; Speech of Mr. Alexander E. Orr, President of the Chamber of Commerce, Proceedings of the Chamber of Commerce, November 17, 1896, New York Chamber of Commerce and Industry Records, Box 100, Folder 1, Series 2, Vol. 37, 1894-1895 Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library (5800); William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 278, in Williams, *Realigning America*, 91.

men who believed that the "revival of confidence and national business prosperity" was dependent on the preservation of the gold standard, Bryan's clarion call for free coinage of silver posed an existential threat.³³

After Bryan was crowned the Democratic nominee, American capitalists and employers did not give up the struggle. Far from it. They devoted their money, influence, and, eventually, their employees to the cause of defeating Bryan and free silver. The President of the New York Chamber of Commerce, Alexander E. Orr, exulted after the election about how employers had united to beat back the tide of "anarchy, socialism, and the loud tongued advocates of a debased currency." Orr was proud that at the moment when "the issue looked dark and threatening," the Chamber of Commerce and its allies in business and the press had "stood in all its strength and manhood for the integrity of our Republican institutions" against Bryan's promised revolution. What did Orr mean by this self-congratulatory declaration? What did American employers do during the election campaign of 1896 to stop Bryan and his "morally blind, mischievous and dangerous guides" from leading the nation over the cliff?³⁴

What they did, this chapter argues, was coerce their employees to express political support for McKinley and against Bryan. The Chicago *Inter Ocean* defended the logic of this choice. The Republican paper began by explaining that employers had taken an "extraordinary interest in the pending election" because they had been traumatized by the conversion of "the

³³ Minutes of the Chamber of Commerce, Vol. X. March 5, 1896, New York Chamber of Commerce and Industry Records, Box 255, Folder 2, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library (5794). "Bryan was not merely a candidate to oppose; he became a candidate to fear." Harpine, *From the Front Porch*, 65.

³⁴ Speech of Mr. Alexander E. Orr, President of the Chamber of Commerce, Proceedings of the Chamber of Commerce, November 17, 1896, New York Chamber of Commerce and Industry Records, Box 100, Folder 1, Series 2, Vol. 37, 1894-1895 Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library (5800).

army of industry... into an army of hobos" during the recent financial panic. The possibility that Bryan's election would renew and deepen the depression produced a pronounced "anxiety" among businessmen which in turn engendered "impatience with the supporters" of a man they saw as a demagogue threatening their prosperity. As a result of their anxiety and impatience, the *Inter Ocean* acknowledged that a "coercive disposition has been shown by some, perhaps by many" employers throughout the nation. The paper characterized this disposition as "natural, but...both wrong and impolitic." It reminded its readers that every voter had the right to cast his ballot as he pleased, but argued that an employer also carried a "duty" to explain economic realities to all those he employed.³⁵ In the tough economic times of the mid-1890s, with Bryan's revolutionary campaign seeming to threaten their prosperity, and with thousands of potential Bryan voters dependent on them for their livelihoods, employers throughout the nation convinced themselves that coercing their workingmen was a necessity.

The Protections of the Secret Ballot

As scared of Bryan as they were, employers were not able to use the same methods of "influence" against their employees in 1896 as they had in elections past. As detailed in Chapter Two, economic voter intimidation in the late nineteenth century had two main elements: employers threatened to discharge their employees for voting the wrong way, and they controlled or observed their employees at the polls to ensure they cast the desired ballot. States' widespread adoption of ballot secrecy between 1888-1892 robbed employers of the second half of that

³⁵ "Coercion," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 17, 1896, 12.

equation: observation and control at the polling place. As Bryan himself explained in a mid-October campaign rally: "the laboring men of this country were instrumental in getting an Australian ballot to protect them in just such a crisis as we are passing through."³⁶ The ability to observe voters at the polls had rendered discharge threats far more effective, as employers could easily connect an employee to his ballot.

The pairing of discharge threats and poll watching had proven effective in defeating a radical populist just a few years before Bryan's campaign. In 1892, the populist crusader Thomas E. Watson ran for Congress in Georgia against the regionally predominant Democratic Party. He came up short on election day and contested the results, charging in part that Democrats had applied the "job lash" to prevent African American and white working men from voting for him in the mills and factories of Augusta. Because Georgia had not yet enacted ballot secrecy—the state would not do so until 1922—the Democrats who opposed Watson's populist campaign were free to observe and threaten voters at the polls. The brief Watson submitted to Congress specified that "electors around the polls were intimidated" by men who marched them up to the polls and supervised them handing in their tickets while standing at the literal elbow of the voter. Watson argued that economic voter intimidation undermined the political rights of workingmen, rendering them mere multipliers for their bosses votes. He summed up this reality by describing the coercive pressures placed on a workingman who was threatened and observed by his employer at the polls by sadly asking "if voter he could be called." Observing voters at the polls

³⁶ "Coercion Their Argument," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1896, 3. Other politicians were explicit about the reform's effect on coercion. A judge in Utah argued in a campaign speech that the secret ballot "enables the wage-worker to vote as he pleases without coercion from his employer." "In the North Country: Judges Power and King Doing Great Work," *The Salt Lake Herald*, October 11, 1896, 2 (daily: 6,200).

was a critical tool of economic voter intimidation throughout the nation in the 1870s and 1880s. Yet, while southern Democrats could still wield it against Populists and Republicans into the 1890s and beyond, the critical votes in the 1896 election would be cast in states where voters filled out their ballots in secret.³⁷

Newspapers covering the 1896 campaign argued that the secret ballot would effectively protect voters—outside the South—from the kind of coercive tactics that had doomed Watson in 1892 and many other candidates throughout the nation before the new ballot laws came into effect. *The Washington Post* explained that if coercive employers were able to "vote the men" as they wanted, McKinley would win in a landslide. "The Australian ballot system, however, interferes somewhat with the working of Mark Hanna's schemes." Acknowledging that employers had successfully coerced workers in elections past, the *Post* emphasized that that had been before the introduction of ballot secrecy. Now that voters were protected at the polls, "coercion will hardly win in this country this time."³⁸ The *Denver Evening Post* also reviewed the course of past election abuses, trumpeting the "advantages and safeguards not then dreamt of... the greatest of these is the Australian ballot." The secret ballot weakened employers' control

³⁷ During the 1896 campaign the Populist Party nominated Watson to share the party's ticket with Bryan as Vice President. Bryan refused to dump Arthur Sewall, the Democratic convention's choice for the second spot on the ticket. *Watson v. Black Contested Election Case*, House of Representatives Committee on Elections, HR 53A-F9.10, National Archives Building, Washington, DC. (6251, 6262, 6264, 6272-3).

³⁸ "No Coercion Under Australian Ballot," *The Washington Post*, September 27, 1896, 6. A day earlier the *Post* reprinted a piece from the *Indianapolis News* arguing: "employers understand that, no matter how much they would like to control their men, they are powerless to do so... any attempt to do so will inevitably react, and that when the voter gets into the booth on election day he will, if there has been any effort to dictate to him, take his revenge by voting just the other way. Thus it is true, that not only can employers not control their employees, but they cannot even make the attempt to do so without danger. This, we say, is understood perfectly." "Coercion Never Effective," from the *Indianapolis News* in *The Washington Post*, September 26, 1896, 6. See also: F.A. Myers, "Security of the Ballot," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), September 26, 1896, 1.

over their employees at the polls. They could make a discharge threat, but when it came to firing workers who defied them, they were now "helpless except in making wholesale discharges in which the innocent suffer with the guilty."³⁹ The *New York Journal* thanked secret ballot promoter Henry George for the innovation he had brought to American elections. With it, a workingman could cast the ballot of his own choosing "no matter how bullied and bulldozed he may be during the intervening days."⁴⁰

Republican papers concurred that the secret ballot prevented intimidation but used that fact to argue that Democratic claims of coercion were simply campaign lies. The *New York Sun* claimed that "the Australian ballot is an effectual protection against coercion" and therefore accusations that employers were coercing their employees for McKinley were part of a cynical effort to "deceive and mislead labor."⁴¹ The *Chicago Daily Tribune* expressed its disgust with Bryan and Democratic newspapers for their "assinity" in claiming that employers were coercing employees. It was common knowledge, the *Tribune* explained, that voters cast their ballots in northern states "under a ballot law that absolutely prevents effective coercion." And since coercion had been reduced in political discourse over the past decade into solely a northern

³⁹ "A Great Point Gained," *Denver Evening Post* (Denver, CO), September 10, 1896, 4.

⁴⁰ "The Journal's Fund: Workingmen Everywhere, Defying the Coercion of Employers, Are Lending Aid to Their Party," *New York Journal*, September 18, 1896, 4 (daily: 100,000).

Pro-Bryan papers enjoyed citing anti-Bryan papers when they praised the secret ballot and denounced coercion. The *Arizona Republican* (which despite its name supported Bryan) quoted an article from the Republican *Boston Post* which praised the secret ballot's reduction of election day coercion and noted that "before the introduction of the Australian ballot system the intimidation of workmen by employers was usual, not to say universal." The *Post* expressed concern that scared employers would still try to coerce their employees and encouraged them to take the honorable approach and let their men decide the issue for themselves. "Compulsory Education," *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix, AZ), August 20, 1896. (daily: 1,800). For another example see: "Bulldozing Tactics," *Geneva Daily Gazette* (Geneva, NY), August 21, 1896, 2. (daily: 1,300).

⁴¹ "Jones Rebuked By Hanna," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 22, 1896, 1 (daily: 125,000).

problem, the lack of ballot secrecy in southern states was immaterial. The *Tribune* argued that the secret ballot had been "adopted partly to put an end to the cry of 'coercion'" during campaigns and had done so admirably since it had been generally adopted. Democrats had spent years accusing northern Republicans of coercion and so state legislatures had reluctantly enacted new laws to render that form of intimidation impossible. The return of the coercion charge in 1896, the paper explained, was simply "balderdash."⁴²

For decades, workingmen had watched as their coworkers were coerced by their employers or read stories in newspapers about intimidation in workplaces of every kind. Many had experienced the pressure of discharge threats themselves. They knew the seriousness of unemployment during the dreadful panic, and they had every reason to believe their employers had strong leanings in this election in particular. Despite the promise of the secret ballot, it was still a relatively new technology and not all workingmen had faith in its ability to protect their votes. Investigative journalist Alfred Henry Lewis of the *New York Journal* traveled to Chicago in September to investigate accusations of coercion and ended up probing the effectiveness of the secret ballot at length. He acknowledged that despite the strict protections of the law, not everyone felt safe casting a ballot in defiance of their bosses. Lewis explained that there was a "general belief among workmen that their employers are able to discover the character of their

⁴² "Charges of 'Coercion' Are Asinine," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 5, 1896, 6 (daily: 100,000). See also: "Untitled," *The Pioneer Express* (Pembina, ND), August 7, 1896, 1 (daily: 1,126) and "Bryan's Coercion Lie Exposed," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 20, 1896, 6.

ballots, not withstanding the Australian system."⁴³ The anti-Bryan Chicago *Inter Ocean* concurred that it would not be difficult for an employer, especially of a small number of men, to find out to his own satisfaction how his men voted." The paper posited that it was simply "human nature" for an employer who knew how his employees had voted to fire those "who helped bring on the panic."⁴⁴ Newspapers of both parties sought to reassure workingmen that the secret ballot would protect them from their bosses, but the fear that employers would still be able to practice coercion in some form remained.⁴⁵

Though it was new and untested, the secret ballot gave voters real protection. For a laborer whose boss controlled every element of his working life, Bryan argued that the secret ballot made election day "the one day in the year when he is his own master."⁴⁶ Because of this barrier, employers who sought to influence their employees in 1896 focused on limiting and channeling their political expression in the days and weeks prior to election day. Pro-McKinley employers used two primary forms of coercion during the 1896 election campaign to control the political behavior of their employees outside the polling place, though they can both be loosely

⁴³ Alfred Henry Lewis, "Democrats Certain To Carry Illinois," *New York Journal*, September 16, 1896, 8, and "View in Chicago," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), September 22, 1896, np. The *Journal* had earlier reported that men who worked for a dictatorial street railway magnate in St. Louis, Missouri, hoped that their boss' "power to pinch ends at the voting booth." But many of the terrified workers contended that he surely had "that all fixed" and would corrupt the "election people" to keep an eye on how people voted even in the supposedly secret voting booths. "No Speech From Steps," *New York Journal*, September 14, 1896, 4.

⁴⁴ "Coercion," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 17, 1896, 12.

⁴⁵ Representative examples: "Local Items," *The Butler Weekly Times* (Butler, MO), September 17, 1896, 5 (weekly: 1,752), L, "Illinois Doubtful," *Daily Capital Journal* (Salem, OR), August 24, 1896, 3 (daily: 1,640), "Sound Money Pledges," *The Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), August 22, 1896, 4 (daily: 12,350), "Fight With Coercion," *New York Journal*, October 17, 1896, 6, "West Virginia Leans Toward Silver," *New York Journal*, October 8, 1896, 7, "The Southern Pacific and Bryan," *Morning Appeal* (Carson City, NV), August 21, 1896, 2 (daily: 700), and "The Silent Vote," *Morning Appeal* (Carson City, NV), August 20, 1896, 3.

⁴⁶ "Masses Listen," *The Topeka State Journal* (Topeka, KS), September 3, 1896, 2 (daily: 6,746).

categorized as levying economic threats. First, employers told their employees again and again that Bryan's victory would result in wage cuts or firings—only their vote for McKinley could save their jobs. Many factory owners and railroad bosses then paired this threat with a verbal survey about their employees' political beliefs or a written questionnaire asking them who they were planning to vote for in the coming election. These messages and surveys allowed employers to gain information about their workers' voting intentions that they could potentially leverage on election day. More importantly, this approach unobtrusively reminded their employees that the men who signed their paychecks had strong opinions on the candidates and might try to connect political opinions to hiring decisions.

The second method was less overtly threatening but more widespread. Employers throughout the nation forced their employees to sign pro-McKinley pledges, join "money schools" to learn the value of the gold standard, or march in political rallies wearing pro-McKinley campaign gear. By compelling their employees to participate in these spectacles, employers impressed upon them that their bosses had chosen a side, enjoined them to publicly—if sometimes reluctantly—join that side, and generated positive press coverage emphasizing McKinley's wide popularity with the working classes. With the economy in tatters and workingmen more precarious than at any time since the mid-1870s, even subtle threats that support for Bryan would lead to discharge were effective at influencing their political behavior.

Coercive Messages and Indirect Discharge Threats

On July 24, 1896, Frank H. Peavey, the grain "Elevator King" of Minneapolis, sent a letter to all his employees that many of them interpreted as an attempt to coerce them. In his letter, Peavey laid out his political views and the stakes of the election, disclaimed any intention to unduly influence anyone's vote, and closed with a detailed questionnaire about his employees' political leanings. Peavey's letter and the controversy that followed is a good example of the coercive nature of election-related messages from employers during the 1896 campaign. It was also one of the first widely reported incidents of coercion during that cycle and so attracted a great deal of popular attention.

Peavey's letter began with an indirect discharge threat. He expressed his concern that workingmen would suffer from "men of large affairs curtailing their business operations awaiting the result of the November elections" which he blamed on the "unwise measures" proposed by "thoughtless or unscrupulous men." Without naming Bryan specifically, Peavey emphasized to his employees that Bryan's campaign and their jobs were connected. He explained that he had chosen to reach out to his hundreds of employees about the issue because, as he saw it, the incipient campaign was "not a matter of partisanship, but a matter of business." To his credit, Peavey told his employees that he had "no desire to in any way coerce or unduly influence you." He merely wanted to be able to send each of his employees "literature on both sides" of the currency question so each man could make a decision "in your own best interests and those of the country."⁴⁷

⁴⁷ "He Wants To Know," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), July 25, 1896, 2.

After explaining to his employees that the national political crisis of Bryan's nomination and their personal economic precariousness were intimately connected, Peavey asked them to reply personally to him "as soon as possible" with answers to four questions. First, "Are you a Republican, Democrat, Populist or independent." Second, "Do you intend to vote for a gold candidate or a silver candidate for president? For congressman? For governor?" Peavey also asked that they explain their reasoning for their planned vote and what benefits they thought would "accrue to your own interests and those of the country" in each case. Peavey's third and fourth questions asked his employees to speculate as to the gold/silver leanings of the voters in their towns and the farmers who they interacted with when they brought their grain to the elevators. Peavey closed by asking his employees to pose the first two questions, about political leanings and voting intentions, to assistants in their offices. They were to mail "personally" to Peavey the answers to the questionnaire. Peavey emphasized that they should include the "full name" of each person alongside their voting intentions.⁴⁸

A reporter from the *Penny Press*, an independent pro-Bryan Minneapolis-based newspaper, obtained a copy of the letter and brought it to the company's office for an explanation. President Peavey was not available for comment, but his younger brother, James M. Peavey, hurriedly explained that he was certain his brother had not meant "to make employees view the political situation through coercion." If he had thought "such a construction might be placed upon his letter" he would probably not have written it. He had simply wanted to inform his employees of the complex details of "one of the most important" questions that American

⁴⁸ "He Wants To Know," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), July 25, 1896, 2.

voters had ever been asked to settle. He emphasized again and again that "no employee positively need fear that his position will be interfered with by the company; no matter how he may want to vote."⁴⁹

While Peavey's letter may have been innocent in isolation, the context of over two decades of employer coercion weighed on the minds of editors of the *Penny Press* as they reported on the situation. The paper noted that the elder Peavey was well respected, but reminded its readers that "for years and years" elections had been carried by employers coercing their employees into voting Republican by threatening their wages and figuring out how they voted. The *Penny Press* was adamant that "such methods will not do any longer" and it was incensed that other commercial houses were said to be considering Peavey's "course of coercion." Though the paper was hopeful that coercion of the type that was common in Minnesota elections in the 1880s would not return, it was now on guard against the possibility.⁵⁰

Whatever Peavey's intent in writing his letter, the political organizations that supported Bryan interpreted it as an attempt to coercively control workingmen's political rights. Just four days after the *Penny Press* reported on Peavey's letter, the Democrats of Hennepin County, which encompassed Minneapolis, met to nominate delegates to the state convention and put forward a party platform. As expected, the county party organization endorsed Bryan and pledged to fight

⁴⁹ "He Wants To Know," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), July 25, 1896, 2.

⁵⁰ "The Peavey Circular," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), July 25, 1896, 4. This was not a new form of coercion, though it was practiced particularly widely during the 1896 campaign. Observers, particularly Democratic newspapermen, may have remembered a particularly egregious case during the 1880 presidential election when a Standard Oil Superintendent in New Jersey allegedly walked through the depot asking every man who he was voting for and marking down their answers in the wage book. The next day twenty-two Democrats were discharged. The allegation, which the supervisor did not deny, was carried on the front page of the New York *Sun* the Sunday before election day and garnered a great deal of popular attention. "Bulldozing For Garfield," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 31, 1880, 1.

for free silver, but the gathered party members included a special section in their public resolutions that was probably inspired by Peavey's letter. The very last resolution that the convention adopted read: "We hereby condemn all indirect threats which may be embodied in published letters by employers of men to their employees with a view to intimidating them in the free expression of their opinion on the great question now before the people."⁵¹ Two weeks later the state Democratic Party convention endorsed a similar sentiment, voting to condemn "the attempts of employers of labor to intimidate their men by addressing letters to them."⁵² The People's Party of Minnesota held its own convention a month later. The convention chose to forgo making its own nominations and instead endorse the Democratic slate for state offices. The People's Party offered as justification for this decision the delegates' horror at the "systematic intimidation of employees and other voters" perpetrated by the "corporate allies" of the pro-gold party.⁵³ The widespread attention that the *Penny Press* brought to Peavey's letter meant that his employees probably had little to fear in terms of politicized discharges. Peavey's works would be watched before and after the election. The decision of Minnesota's Democrats and Populists to so publicly condemn employer coercion suggested that they feared its effectiveness and believed that raising awareness of it could be politically advantageous for Bryan.

At the heart of Peavey's letter was an argument that Bryan's economic ideas threatened American industry and therefore workingmen should vote against the Democratic nominee to preserve their own positions. This argument formed a prominent theme in Republican campaign

⁵¹ "112-Count 'Em-112: The Silver Democrats Elect That Many Delegates To State Convention," *The St. Paul Globe* (St. Paul, MN), July 29, 1896, 3.

⁵² "The State Convention," *The Irish Standard* (Minneapolis, MN), August 15, 1896, 6 (weekly: 3,750).

⁵³ "Lind Named Again," *The Saint Paul Globe* (St. Paul, MN), August 27, 1896, 1.

literature. A Republican pamphlet that was distributed widely in late-July and early-August to "Wage-Earners" deftly walked the hazy line between political information and intimidation. The pamphlet reminded workingmen that "times are hard and that many wage earners are out of employment." Times would remain hard, the pamphlet explained, until "the present agitation in favor of the free coinage of silver is given its death blow at the polls." The pamphlet contained the same implicit threat as Peavey's letter but it did not attempt to single out workingmen for economic consequences because of their individual votes. If the pamphlet was read by one of Peavey's workingmen just days after receiving the coercive letter it may have confirmed to him the high economic stakes that rested on his vote in November. But the pamphlet itself was not inherently coercive.⁵⁴

When bosses made the same argument to their workers directly, however, the context of the power differential between them often turned the interaction coercive. For example, in late-August the pro-Bryan *Evening Journal* of Wilmington, Delaware, alleged that one of the chief overseers of the Blumenthal Factory asked each of the 500 or so men who worked there how they planned to vote in the coming election. Evasions were not permitted; each employee "was pinned down to a decisive statement," though no overt attempt was made to influence his choice. A short time later, the overseer gave each employee a small silk button of the American flag bearing the message "sound money." By demanding to know who was planning to support Bryan and then telling their employees in badge form who the company was supporting, the

⁵⁴ Joseph B. Bowles to McKinley, August 1, 1896, William McKinley Papers: Series 1, General Correspondence and Related Items-1902; Sept. 6-1897, Feb. 22. 1847. Image 467. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss322680001/>.

Blumenthal employees were left with no doubt that the men who signed their paychecks had a favored candidate and expected them to honor their pledges.⁵⁵

Notably, this form of intimidation did not have to take place on election day itself. Indeed, coercive messages from employers threatening economic consequences for supporting Bryan cropped up throughout the summer of 1896. On August 1, William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, the only major New York daily to back Bryan, published its first report on coercion—an accusation that a railroad boss in Virginia had sent a letter to his employees threatening to cut wages and "dismiss hundred of them" if Bryan won.⁵⁶ That same day, *The Atlanta Constitution* reported that a bank in Omaha, Nebraska, sent a letter to the farmers whose mortgages it held claiming that due to the "socialistic feeling emanating from the Chicago convention" the bank was planning to call in all its loans and was preparing for mass unemployment and civil unrest.⁵⁷ Just a few days later the president of the Crescent Horseshoe Works in western Virginia tried to "coerce his employees into voting for McKinley" by blaming a thirty-three percent wage cut on Bryan's "agitation for free and unlimited coinage of silver." He threatened that the works would be closed entirely if Bryan won the election. The paper described how most of the fifty employees "had families dependent upon them" and since there was "no other employment" available, they had little choice but to accept the wage cuts and wait

⁵⁵ "They Fear Coercion," *Evening Journal* (Wilmington, DE), August 22, 1896, 1.

⁵⁶ "Coercing His Employees," *New York Journal*, August 1, 1896, 12.

⁵⁷ "Coercion of Conviction," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 1, 1896, 1. The same letter was reprinted, with additional commentary, in the *Birmingham State Herald* the following day: "Putting On The Thumbscrew," *Birmingham State Herald* (Birmingham, AL), August 2, 1896, 10 (daily: 6,500).

for election day.⁵⁸ This was far from an isolated incident. During the first two weeks of August newspapers reported that if Bryan won, banks in upstate New York would foreclose on farms, a copper mining company in Michigan would close four mines, an Indiana beef and butter firm would slash wages, life insurance companies would reduce payouts to beneficiaries, and the Manhattan Elevated Railroad Company would "not extend their lines a single rod."⁵⁹

Deluged with similar reports, the *New York Journal* summed up a growing consensus in the Democratic press on August 9: Mark Hanna's Republican Party had begun a campaign of coercion. Employers were making indirect but inescapable threats to cut wages and fire workers and banks and insurance companies were levying threats against anyone who appeared on their books in the red. With threats to their jobs and homes seemingly popping up all around, precarious workingmen found it increasingly believable that their employers would try to "deny

⁵⁸ "Coercion In Virginia," *The Roanoke Daily Times* (Roanoke, VA), August 6, 1896, 1 (daily: 3,300). The article was reprinted in: "Coercion In Virginia," *The Houston Daily Post* (Houston, TX), August 8, 1896, 5. (daily: 8,336) and "Coercion in Virginia," *Wheeling Register* (Wheeling, WV), August 6, 1896, 2 (daily: 7,800). Nevada Senator William Morris Stewart, who left the Republican Party to support silver and Bryan, announced that he had heard stories about "the alleged intimidation of its employees" by a railroad company and promised to speak out against it during the campaign. "Silver Headquarters: Senator Stewart's Advice," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), August 6, 1896, 1 (daily: 36,430).

⁵⁹ "Bankers Wagin War," *Watertown Re-Union* (Watertown, NY), August 8, 1896, 1 (weekly: 3,500), "The People Can Neither Be Bought Nor Bulldozed," *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), August 11, 1896, 4 (daily: 2,300). See also: "Untitled," from the *St. Louis Republic* in *The Salt Lake Herald*, August 6, 1896, 4, "Untitled," *The Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), August 9, 1896, 6, "From Washington," *Alexandria Gazette* August 7, 1896, 2, (Alexandria, D.C.) (daily: 750), "Resent Threats," *Waterbury Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), August 7, 1896, 4 (daily: 2,700), and "An Attempt at Coercion," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 11, 1896, 6.

[them] a livelihood" if they failed to support McKinley.⁶⁰ On August 16, Ellis Meredith, leader of the successful women's suffrage movement in Colorado and an editor at the *Rocky Mountain News*, expressed her fear that coercion would prevent Bryan from winning. "Hopefulness is not one of the highest bumps in my phrenological mountain range," she explained, and with employees in factories and farmers on the plains terrified of defying established economic interests, she believed that there was little chance that Bryan could win.⁶¹

The problem became so acute by late-August that the *Chicago Record*, a prominent independent daily, suggested to employers that "to avoid suspicion of intimidation" they should not "take a canvas" of their employees' political allegiances and should give equal time to pro-gold and pro-silver speakers in their factories.⁶² Uncertainty over which messages were coercive and which were educational only added to the fears of wage working voters who dreaded discharge into a desolate job market. As *The Salt Lake City Herald* described, railroad employees had been so traumatized by layoffs and pay cuts that they clung to their jobs with "the tenacity

⁶⁰ "True And False Democracy," *New York Journal*, August 9, 1896, 6. See also: "Campaign of Coercion," *The Daily Herald* (Brownsville, TX), August 13, 1896, 2 (daily: 350). After the election the British monthly *The National Review* emphasized the "strong wave of pressure passing from the bankers" to the workingmen "to whom it was made evident that permanent employment depended on the defeat of Mr. Bryan." The *Journal* summed the situation up thoughtfully: "An artisan or clerk in good wages, with a decent deposit, and possibly a dependent family, was hardly in a position to consider a complex economic problem when menaced with the loss of employment and the bisection of his savings. He not only voted to preserve his home but frequently became an active canvasser in a quiet way for the Republican Party." "The Appeal To The Artisan," *The National Review* (London, UK), December 1896, No. 166, 437. For other examples see: "Allegany Imbroglia," *Olean Herald* (Olean, NY), August 14, 1896, 4 (daily: 1,100) and "Maryland Politics: Railroads And Banks Actively Work For Sound Money," Special Dispatch to the *Baltimore Sun*, *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), August 11, 1896, 2.

⁶¹ Ellis Meredith, "Intellectual Golden Gruel," *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, CO), August 16, 1896, Issue 229, 21 (daily: 23,951).

⁶² "Employers and Silver, Wage-Earner Should Not Be Coerced, But Educated," from the *Chicago Record* (daily: 128,257) in the *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), August 25, 1896, 4 (daily: 17,754). Interestingly, the *Record's* call to ban messages from employers that could be considered coercive in any way was reprinted in the *Oregonian*, a staunchly Republican newspaper.

and desperation of a drowning man fondling a board in midocean." The men were "so completely intimidated" that they were afraid to talk politics even with their closest friends. While the paper averred that railway employees were typically possessed of an "independent spirit," they had been worn down by the "hard times" and were now likely to give way to the "coercive measures" of their bosses.⁶³

⁶³ "Brown and Mrs. Brown... Circular from the Railway Age Distributed Among Employees," *The Salt Lake City Herald* (Salt Lake City, UT), September 9, 1896, 5.



Banker and Life Insurance President (in pathetic double snuffle):—My dear sir, you won't vote for free silver and the cutting in two of the bank balance and insurance policy, will you?

Despairing Worker—Gentlemen, I'm less worried about bank balances and insurance policies than I am about getting work to support my family.—National Bimetallist.

Figure 7.1: This political cartoon in the *Labor Advocate*, a Populist/Labor paper based in Alabama, was republished from the *National Bimetallist* paper based in Denver, Colorado. It reflects the economic pressures afflicting workingmen during the prolonged depression and the decidedly unsubtle methods that capitalists employed to suggest that workingmen vote for McKinley.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ "Their Argument Misses Fire," *Labor Advocate* (Birmingham, AL), September 12, 1896, <http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/09121a.html>.

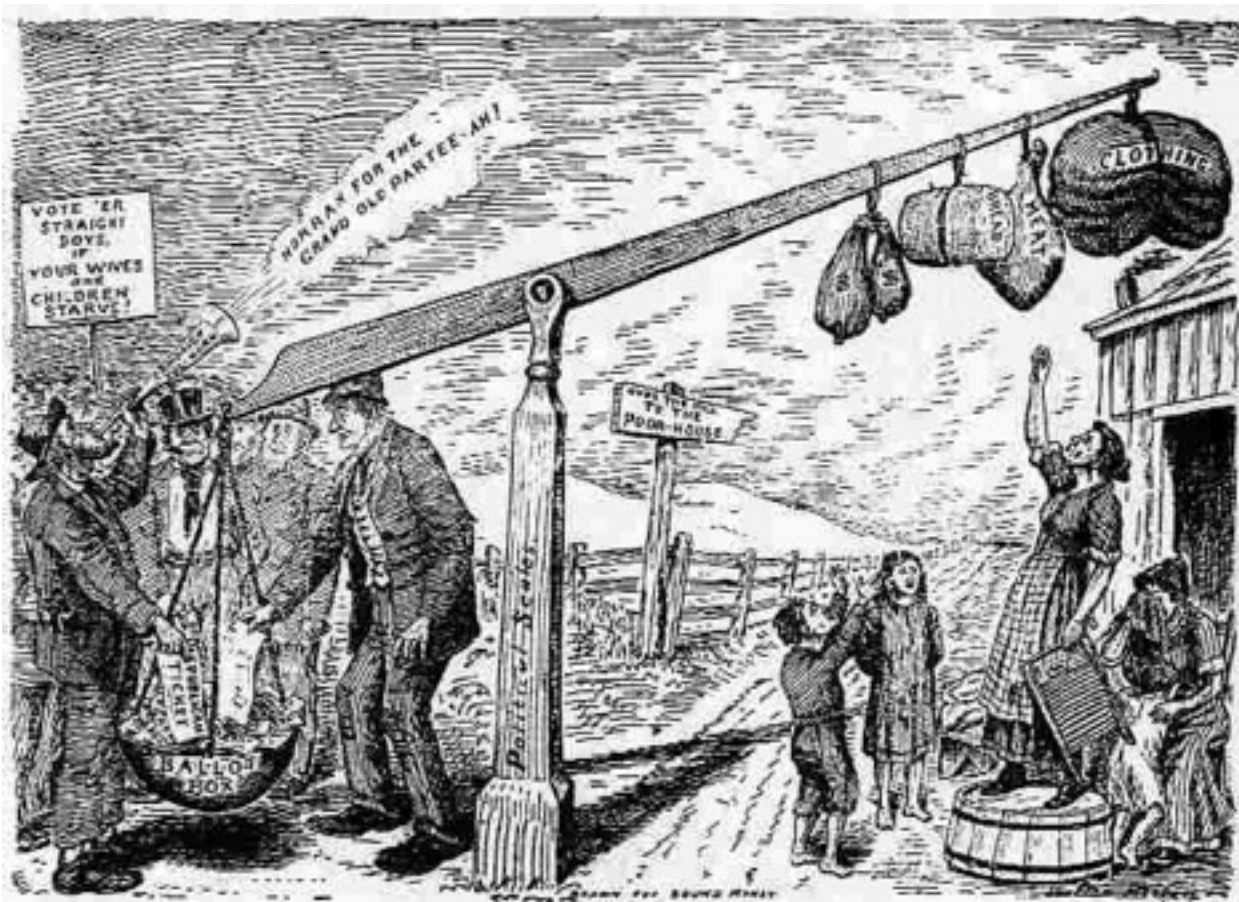


Figure 7.2: Printed by Jacob Coxey's Populist paper in the last weeks of the campaign, this cartoon sought to dramatize the choice that Democrats argued workingmen were being forced to make. By placing their "Republican Tickets" in the "Ballot Box" depicted as the "political scales," poor workingmen were putting prosperity out of reach of their families. The sign on the far left reads: "vote 'er straight boys, if your wives and children starve." The sign in the center reads: "over the hill to the poor-house."⁶⁵

Stripped of context, few of these statements made by employers, banks, and insurance companies were inherently coercive. Many employers took pains to explicitly deny that coercion was their intent and some may truly have believed that they were simply informing their employees of the tough economic realities. Context mattered, however, and as Democratic

⁶⁵ "It is No Longer the Republican Party of Lincoln, but of Robbery and Rothschilds," *Sound Money* (Massillon, OH), October 22, 1896, <http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/1022csm.html>.

Governor William Stone of Missouri explained after a railroad boss lectured his employees on the terrors of silver coinage: "such statements are very significant when made by an employer to men who live by daily labor."⁶⁶ The cumulative effect of powerful employers telling employees that their jobs and their votes were connected, combined with the punishing economic depression and the omnipresence of stories of coercion in the press, convinced thousands of wage working men that they had to choose between economic security and political freedom.

Gold Badges, Public Spectacles, Money Schools, and Club Rolls

The second method of undue influence that employers innovated in the 1896 campaign was to force their employees to evince public support for McKinley. Compelling employees to sign pro-gold pledges, participate in "money schools," or march in parades did not influence an election as directly as did forcing a man to change his vote at the polls. However, politically active employers had every reason to believe that public displays of employees' political expressions were useful to a campaign. As historian Michael McGerr explained, both parties mixed campaigns of education with campaigns of spectacle to shape political narratives around their candidates. While educational methods were ascendant, "both parties still used spectacle in 1896" because they believed that mass marches and public pronouncements of support for their candidate were effective methods of rallying support and shifting the narrative of the campaign

⁶⁶ "Mr. Stone's Reply," *Kansas City Daily Journal* (Kansas City, MO), September 29, 1896, 1 (daily: 27,000), "Gov. Stone Replies," *The Guthrie Daily Leader* (Guthrie, OK), September 30, 1896, 2 (daily: 2,800).

in their favor.⁶⁷ Compelling workingmen to publicly embrace McKinley also limited their ability to campaign for Bryan as their seeming flip-flop could not help but diminish the rhetorical power of any pro-Bryan statements they sought to make.

Bryan himself argued that employers forcing employees to wear pro-McKinley badges constituted coercion, and explained why the method had emerged in 1896. In a campaign speech in Duluth, Minnesota, on October 13, Bryan lamented the "hard times" facing workingmen during the ongoing depression. These men were being forced to "wear the Republican badge under compulsion" by bosses who desired his defeat and Bryan confessed he could not "find it in my heart" to criticize them for their decision. Workingmen were in no position to refuse the offer of a political button from their employer in the dreadful economic climate of 1896. Precarious and well aware of the contentious nature of the election, these men were under extreme pressure to accept the dictates of their bosses when it came to political expressions like button-wearing. But, Bryan emphasized, forcing employees to wear the badge outside the polls was now the extent of employers' power. In states with the Australian ballot, Bryan exulted, "while a man may wear a badge in order to save his employment, he has a right to use his vote in order to save his country." The secret ballot was "the protection of the American workingmen" and ensured that "tyranny waits outside while he goes in to vote." This was a real improvement in election security and political equality for wage workers. Yet, as Bryan acknowledged, the tyranny of

⁶⁷ Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 142. *The National Review*, a conservative British monthly, speculated after the election that these employers believed that by coercing their men to join the demonstrations: "the great McKinley host might assume overwhelming proportions" and impress wavering voters who wanted to end up on the winning side. "Prosperity, Coercion, Advice," *The National Review* (London, UK), December 1896, No. 166, 438.

economic intimidation indeed waited outside for the voters to cast their ballots. Bosses demanding that their employees make public pronouncements of support for McKinley and gold were present in the lives of their employees in the weeks before election day, they were there outside the polls, and they would be there in the years to come. The Australian ballot could protect a workingman as he voted, but ballot secrecy could not protect his political speech the rest of the time.⁶⁸ Effectively circumventing the protected space of the voting booth, employers sponsored pro-McKinley marches, speeches, weekly meetings, and distributed thousands of buttons and emblems to their employees throughout the campaign.⁶⁹

Forcing employees to wear McKinley buttons or march in parades offered an additional benefit for employers. When the campaign began, a large proportion of the wealthy men of the United States were legitimately terrified that Bryan's policies would produce economic collapse and class warfare. Having the members of the lower classes who were tied closest to them, their employees, publicly renounce Bryan's revolutionary rhetoric may have been a welcome salve to their worried psyches. In particular, the push by employers to have their employees wear buttons

⁶⁸ "Coercion Their Argument," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1896, 3. Henry George himself investigated the issue and asserted that it was "no loss of manhood" for a workingman to walk in the McKinley parade and then "in the secrecy of the Australian ballot" cast his vote for Bryan. Henry George, "Back In Illinois," Special Campaign Correspondence, *The Anaconda Standard* (Anaconda, MT), October 15, 1896, 1. For an example of similar manhood rhetoric see: "Yes, Join the Parade," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), September 12, 1896, 4.

⁶⁹ Just days before the election, the *Penny Press* emphasized, much as Bryan had, that "they can march us as they please, but they can't make us vote as they please." "Speciman Coercion," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), October 28, 1896, 3. *The Labor World* described a similar dynamic just before election day in Duluth. "Untitled," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), October 31, 1896, 13. In an interesting counter-example, in late September a group of Bryanite supporters crashed the meeting of a Great Northern Railway sound money club in St. Paul and heckled the speakers about coercion until they were forced to leave. "A Lie Resented In St. Paul," *The Railway Age* (Chicago, IL), September 25, 1896, 5 (weekly: 6,500). <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.c2538105?urlappend=%3Bseq=333>.

announcing their support for McKinley suggests an overriding desire to *see* their dependents profess allegiance to the same political faith as their employers.

This form of coercion was particularly common on railroads. On October 11, the *New York Journal* reported that employees of the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railway were told to sign up for a company organized "sound money league" and wear the league's patriotic button while at work. An anonymous engineer explained that he and his friends had chosen to wear the buttons because they could not "afford to lose our jobs." While he was careful to explain that he "wouldn't say we were coerced," the engineer emphasized that having the man who paid his wages tell him how to express himself politically was a "pretty strong brand of persuasion."⁷⁰ Railroads spanned the continent, and so too did threats to railroad employees to sign up for sound money clubs. In California, foremen told railwaymen to "sign a pledge promising to support and vote for 'sound money.'" One man told the *Los Angeles Herald* that he did not think the company would "discharge a man simply because he refused to pledge himself to support the gold candidates." But he emphasized the "embarrassing position" that such requests from employers put their employees in. He felt that his boss had treated him well during the tough times of the Panic and did not want to go against him in public. The railwayman explained that he and his fellows had signed the public club list in exchange for "fanciful security of their jobs," but "under the Australian system" they would cast their ballots for Bryan.

⁷⁰ "Close Tab Kept On Their Men's Politics," *New York Journal*, October 11, 1896, 10. Similarly, just three days later the *Penny Press* accused a Minnesota lumber company of forcing its employees to wear yellow "McKinley" badges when they attended a campaign speech by Bryan. "Along the Route," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), 14 Oct. 1896, np.

Unable to observe their votes, employers focused on controlling the political expression of their employees.⁷¹

By forcing employees to sign public rolls endorsing McKinley, employers hoped to limit the political freedom of action of their employees and also impress upon them that all their fellows also supported McKinley. An American Railway Union official noted that railroad men had been "forced to join McKinley clubs" and as a consequence they dared not meet openly in support of Bryan.⁷² Creating a sense of loneliness and isolation for potential Bryanites was a sufficiently common effect of this kind of coercion that the New York *Sun*, a staunchly anti-Bryan paper, felt comfortable joking about it. The paper told the presumably apocryphal story of a workingman named Charley who explained to a policeman that he was being forced by his bosses to run up an American flag with McKinley and Hobart's names emblazoned across the bottom each morning. He was being unfairly picked on, he explained, because in the store "there is nearly a thousand employees. I'm the only Bryan man among them." In the *Sun's* story, the policeman advises Charley that he is being coerced and had "better go see the Captain" to report it.⁷³ With many employers forcing their employees to publicly show support for McKinley, whether through signatures, marches, or badges, the "Charley's" of the country may have thought

⁷¹ "Sound Money Pledges," *The Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), August 22, 1896, 4. Republican papers responded to Democratic claims that this was a form of coercion by either denying it was taking place or by emphasizing that the secret ballot rendered it inconsequential anyhow. See: "Sound Argument," *The Diamond Drill* (Crystal Falls, Iron County, MI), Oct. 3, 1896, 5 (daily: 1,000), and "There Is No Coercion," *Detroit Free Press*, October 6, 1896, 10 (daily: 34,086).

⁷² "Our Gene: E.V. Debs, Labor's Trusted Leader, Speaks to Thousands at Duluth and Superior. Sylvester Keliher also Talks to the Masses in Language that Cannot be Misunderstood. Two of the Nation's Greatest Statesmen," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), October 24, 1896, 4.

⁷³ "Comedy of the Canvass: Coercion of the only Bryan man in a big store," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 10, 1896, 2.

themselves alone in their support for Bryan when other workingmen may have simply been too afraid of the economic consequences to speak up.

Forcing employees to show public support for McKinley was not a joke to newspapers that sided with Bryan. *The Labor World* described in mid-August how workingmen in grain elevators and mills in the upper midwest were being forced by their foremen to sign a "club roll" in support of McKinley and other Republican candidates. One man was so upset at the attempt, the labor paper reported, that he "put down the name of his dog." Though his name may not have appeared on the club roll, seeming to sign it in public view was a form of political expression. Other workingmen who may have known their comrade's political leanings but did not know about his quiet act of rebellion would presume that the McKinley forces had triumphed and all workingmen truly did oppose Bryan's revolutionary ideas. Had the rebellious workingman later tried to campaign for Bryan, his fellows may have judged him unreliable or a dreaded flip-flopper.⁷⁴ As the anti-Bryan *Inter Ocean* explained, a workingman who chose to "wear a McKinley button and yet vote for Bryan" and encouraged others to do so would be stamped "as a liar and a sneak" by his fellows. Such a plan, the pro-McKinley paper explained, insulted the "manhood" and "honor" of all workingmen.⁷⁵ By forcing employees to wear pro-McKinley gear or march in his parades, employers were preemptively reducing the ability of Democratic workingmen to advocate for their candidate.

⁷⁴ "Local Political Notes," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), August 15, 1896, 13. The *New York Journal* reported on a similar story in September. Railway and street car employees in St. Louis were forced to join McKinley clubs, wear buttons, and march in parades, but anonymously told the reporter that they intended to "go into the lone voting booth and make up their tickets for Bryan." "No Speech From Steps," *New York Journal*, September 14, 1896, 4.

⁷⁵ "No Coercion Used," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 21, 1896, 3.

"Your Citizenship As Well As Your Manhood:" Bryan's Rhetoric of Coercion

The coercion of employees by their employers became a central issue in the 1896 presidential election campaign. Bryan, Democratic politicians, labor leaders, and Democratic and labor newspapers emphasized the threat that coercion posed to the manhood, independence, citizenship, and whiteness of workingmen in the North. This rhetoric echoed that of previous decades and meshed nicely with Bryan's effort to define his campaign as a struggle between the nation's poor laborers and wealthy capitalists. Employers were terrified of Bryan's rhetoric and inadvertently provided verifiable proof of his argument that the wealthy classes were conspiring against the masses by attempting to coerce their employees. The claim that coercion was an existential threat to the political equality of white workingmen rang true for a generation of wage workers who had experienced the emasculating and humbling pressure of economic intimidation in elections past.

The rhetoric of coercion in the 1896 campaign did differ from past election cycles in its early start and its pervasiveness. In the 1870s and 1880s, coercion accusations commonly arose in September and October as election day approached. Now that ballot secrecy was the law in nearly every state, employers chose to target their employees' behavior during the campaign rather than the election. This meant that economic voter intimidation began earlier and lasted

longer in 1896 than in previous election cycles.⁷⁶ Newspaper accounts describing coercion began as early as late-July, most notably with the Peavey story, and reached epidemic levels in August.⁷⁷ Another important characteristic of coercion rhetoric in 1896 was its omnipresence. The three weeks between August 11th and August 30th provide a telling example. This was a notably quiet stretch of the campaign—Bryan had returned home to Nebraska after kicking off the campaign in a major New York address and spent those weeks mostly out of the public eye. Yet papers large and small, weekly and daily, Democratic, Republican, independent and labor, covered coercion. During those three weeks, newspapers in every state except for New

⁷⁶ Scholars have generally overlooked the existence of coercion accusations in late-July and August. Matthew Josephson argued in 1938 that "an ugly spirit of coercion and intimidation suddenly showed itself in the late stages of the campaign." He added: "tactics of intimidation were now spreading like a disease" in September and were undertaken in earnest in mid-October. Josephson, *The Politicos*, 702-4. Republican National Chairman Mark Hanna was accurate in his timing if not his sentiment when he asserted that Bryan's managers had made the "nonsensical cry of coercion" into the "manifest policy" of their campaign "shortly after [Bryan's] nomination." Hanna alleged that since the beginning of the campaign the Democratic Party had intentionally sought to "create the belief in the minds of the workingmen that they were being coerced by their employers to vote contrary to their convictions." While Hanna's claim that Bryan's campaign had made alleging coercion into the "manifest policy" of the campaign from the beginning was untrue, he was correct that Democratic newspapers had begun alleging that employers were intimidating their employees far earlier than in past cycles. "Jones Rebuked By Hanna," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 22, 1896, 1.

⁷⁷ "The Peavey Circular," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), July 25, 1896, 4. Even these early stories were preceded by The Socialist Labor Party, a longtime advocate for ballot secrecy. The party met in New York City from July 4-10 to create a platform and nominate a candidate for president who would garner over 36,000 votes nationwide. After renewing the party's support for "secret ballots in all elections" as the most effective solution to coercion, the platform focused on the economic issues which were central to the party's ideology. In particular the Socialist Labor Party believed in the nationalization of all major industries by the federal government so long as "no employee shall be discharged for political reasons." *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Convention of the Socialist Labor Party Held At Grand Central Palace, July 4th to July 10th, 1896*, 56. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b5199726>. The Populist Party, meeting in St. Louis on July 24 to endorse Bryan, made a more general comment on the danger of dependence, bemoaning that "while we have political independence, our financial and industrial independence is yet to be attained." *National Party Platforms, 1840-1972* (Johnson and Porter, eds., 1973), 104. http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=4067.

Hampshire, Florida, and Wyoming carried stories about coercion.⁷⁸ These stories ranged from detailed accounts of accusations against specific employers to brief mentions in political columns that, depending on the partisanship of the paper, denounced or denied the existence of coercion.

⁷⁸ "A Railroader," *The Wheeling Register* (Wheeling, WV), August 22, 1896, 2, "Threatening Silver Men," *Democratic Northwest and Henry County News* (Napoleon, OH), August 27, 1896, 2 (weekly: 2,200), "Sound Money Pledges," *The Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), August 22, 1896, 4, "Traveling Men At Canton," *The Indianapolis Journal* (Indianapolis, IN), August 29, 1896, 8 (daily: 12,128), "As You Like It," *Waterbury Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), August 29, 1896, 4, F.C. Griswold, "Bossing the Workmen," *The Representative* (St. Paul, MN), August 26, 1896, 4, M.J. Bishop, "Must Overthrow Gold," *Freeland Tribune* (Freeland, PA) (weekly: 1,120), August 17, 1896, 4, "Democrats At Erie," *The Scranton Tribune* (Scranton, PA), August 27, 1896, 1 (daily: 13,000), "Bold Intimidation," from the *San Francisco Examiner*, in the *Iron County Register* (Ironton, MI), August 27, 1896, 2, "Purity Of Elections," *The Pioche Weekly Record* (Pioche, NV), August 27, 1896, 1 (weekly: 350), "Threatening Silver Men," *The Prince George's Enquirer and Southern Maryland Advertiser* (Upper Marlborough, MD), August 21, 1896, 2 (weekly: 700), "Intimidating Employees," from the *San Francisco Examiner*, in the *Barton County Democrat* (Great Bend, KS), August 27, 1896, 7 (weekly: 700), "They Fear Coercion," *Evening Journal* (Wilmington, DE), August 22, 1896, 1, "Charge of Coercion," *The Times* (Richmond, VA), August 26, 1896, 1 (daily: 8,000), "That Insurance Gag," *The Meeker Herald* (Meeker, CO), August, 29, 1896, 3 (weekly: 600), "Hanna's Coercion Game," *The Ketchum Keystone* (Ketchum, ID), August 29, 1896, 4 (weekly: 400), "The News of the Day," *Boston Daily Advertiser* (Boston, MA), August 21, 1896; Issue 45 (daily: 21,000), "The People Can Neither Be Bought Nor Bulldozed," *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), August 11, 1896, 4, "No Intimidation," *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator* (New York, NY), August 22, 1896, 4, "Politics at Billings," *The Butte Weekly Miner* (Butte, MT), August 27, 1896, 8 (weekly: 1,500), "Mr. Bryan's Speech," *The Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), August 13, 1896, 4 (daily: 20,000), "The Notification of Bryan," *The Weekly News and Courier* (Charleston, SC), August 19, 1896, 10 (weekly: 7,000), "A Word to Workingmen," *The Comet* (Johnson City, TN), August 20, 1896, 1 (weekly: 1,000), "At It Again," *The Nebraska Independent* (Lincoln, NE), August 13, 1896, 5, "Politics In Business," *The Dalles Times-Mountaineer* (The Dalles, OR), August 29, 1896, 3 (weekly: 1,300), "The Force Behind Bryan," *The Banner-Democrat* (Lake Providence, LA), August 29, 1896, 2 (weekly: 400), "All Work Suspended: O.I. Company Waits for the Result of the Election," *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 14, 1896, 5 (daily: 12,000), and "Untitled," *The Mitchell Capital* (Mitchell, SD), August 21, 1896, 2, "Campaign of Coercion," *The Daily Herald* (Brownsville, TX), August 13, 1896, 6, "Jamieson Opposes Noonday Talks: He Criticises Employers' Instruction of Their Employees," *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 1896, 12, "Various Editorial Notes," *Argus and Patriot* (Montpelier, VT), August 19, 1896, 4, "Political Coercion," *The Owensboro Messenger* (Owensboro, KY), August 23, 1896, 1 (daily: 1,250), "Has Been No Intimidation," *Daily Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock, AR), August 26, 1896, 6 (daily: 5,400), "Col. Phelps On Coercion," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), August 29, 1896, 4, "Coercion In Davenport," *Daily Leader* (Davenport, IA), August 30, 1896, 2, "A movement is on foot," *Our Mountain Home* (Talladega, AL), August 19, 1896, p4 (weekly: 1,500), "Will Right Itself," *The Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), August 24, 1896, 2, "Jersey Populists Views," *The News* (Paterson, NJ), August 17, 1896, 1 (daily: 5,600), "A Public Servant A Hired Man," *Newport Daily News* (Newport, RI), August 11, 1896, 1 (daily: 3,529), "Not Talking Now," *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* (Bangor, ME), August 12, 1896, 4 (daily: 3,100), "Telegraphic Briefs," *Davis County Clipper* (Bountiful, UT), August 14, 1896, 2 (weekly: 600), "Hanna Visits Employers," *Jamestown Weekly Alert*, Jamestown, ND), August 20, 1896, 6 (daily: 500, weekly: ?), "Looks Different," *The Weekly Democrat* (Natchez, MS) August 12, 1896, 6.

Papers in the non-voting territories of Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma covered coercion during those weeks as well.⁷⁹ Accounts of coercion certainly became more common in the last months of the campaign as more prominent Democrats took up the call, but they were in the air early and often in the 1896 campaign. The intensity of the coverage was novel, but the rhetoric of Democratic and labor leaders and papers on coercion largely echoed that of previous decades. Newspapers and politicians emphasized again and again the threat that coercion posed to workingmen's manhood, independence, whiteness, and thus their political equality.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ "Object Lessons," *The Guthrie Daily Leader* (Guthrie, OK), August 21, 1896, 2, "Liberty and Labor," *Deming Headlight* (Deming, NM), August 21, 1896, 2 (weekly: 750), "Same Old Style," *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix, AZ), August 23, 1896, 1, "Compulsory Education," *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix, AZ), August 20, 1896, 4, "Campaign of Education," *The St. Johns Herald* (St. Johns, AZ), August 29, 1896, 1 (weekly: 700).

⁸⁰ Barbara Young Welke, *Law and the Borders of Belonging in the Long Nineteenth Century United States*, New Histories of American Law (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). I found only one example of a Democratic paper reviving the bad-faith arguments of the 1870s and 1880s that coercion in the North was equivalent to violent intimidation in the South. The *Davenport Daily Leader*, a pro-Bryan Iowa paper, used this comparison to shame the "'sound money' Democrats" who had broken with the party to oppose Bryan by reminding them that in 1884 and 1888 they had "denounced unsparingly the bulldozing of the Eastern tariff barons." Now those same men threatened to close factories and fire workmen if Bryan won. The *Leader* employed the Democratic rhetoric of the previous decade, arguing that intimidation "of the negroes of the south or of the tariff 'protected' workmen of the east" was equally reprehensible. While interesting, this particular rhetorical element does not seem to have continued from the 1880s into the 1896 election. This is perhaps because McKinley's campaign avoided discussing the now nearly complete white supremacist takeover of the South in an effort to peel off white votes in some Upper South states. Because Republicans were not attacking southern Democratic methods there was no need or opportunity for pro-Bryan papers to frame workplace coercion as just as bad as southern violence. The only way such a comparison could be relevant was as a way to shame sound money Democrats for their hypocrisy in denouncing coercion in previous elections and relying on it in 1896. "Coercion in Davenport," *Davenport Daily Leader* (Davenport, IA), August 30, 1896, 2.

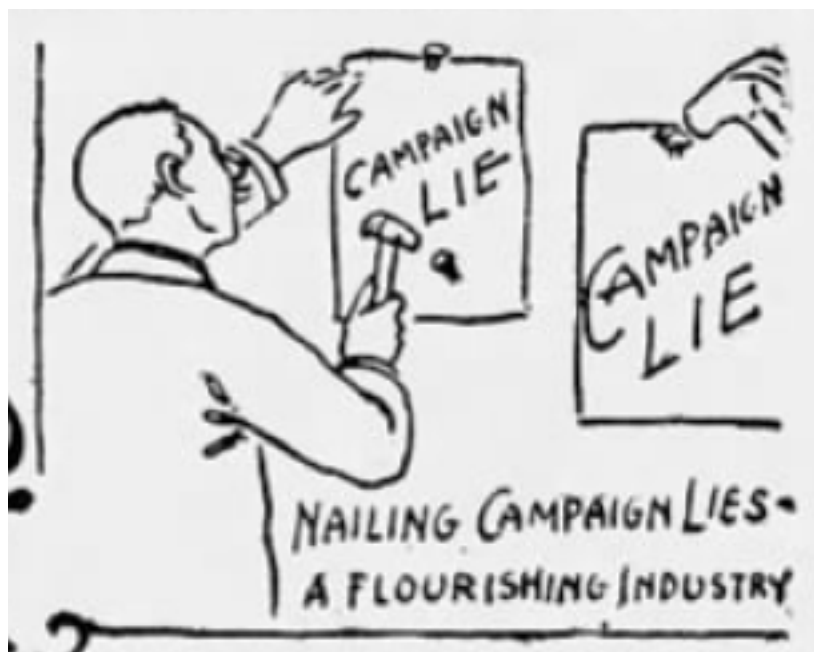


Figure 7.3: This portion of a cartoon printed in a pro-Bryan Democratic paper in Kentucky demonstrated the widespread reach of Republican campaign literature and their opponents' cynical opinion of the veracity of that literature, much of which was posted on factory walls.⁸¹

At first, Bryan framed his concern about coercion in terms of its threat to voter independence and the definition of equal citizenship. He first mentioned coercion on August 10 during an address to a large crowd in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, while en route to New York City for his campaign kickoff.⁸² Bryan began with a story: a man had approached him the day before and mentioned that "his employer was against me, but that he was for me." This was not the first time that Bryan had heard such things from workingmen, he claimed. He explained his view that "the employer and the employee have a right to differ in politics" and that no one on either side of that

⁸¹ "Impaled on a Pencil Point," *The Owensboro Daily Messenger* (Owensboro, KY), August 23, 1896, 1.

⁸² Williams, *Realigning America*, 95.

relationship should try to compel uniformity. As Bryan eloquently put it, "the salary that a man receives does not purchase his citizenship." He was adamant that even though laboring men were dependent for their wages on their employers, they had not willingly sacrificed their political equality and citizenship rights. Wages were paid by employers to employees in exchange for their "labor and not for votes." Bryan suggested that coercive employers did not "deserve to live in a country like this" where the right to vote was the birthright of every man. He closed by asking his listeners to "do your duty as you see it," and stand firm against "intimidation."⁸³

When Bryan returned to the campaign trail on September 8th with a Labor Day speech in Chicago, his rhetoric on coercion had progressed to encompass its threat to the manhood of workingmen as well as their citizenship and independence. Speaking to somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000 excited listeners, Bryan described the ongoing coercion of employees as a threat to the foundational logic of wage work in the United States.⁸⁴ Jokingly, he asked whether anyone in his audience had considered telling his employer "that if he does not vote according to your opinion you will quit working for him?" The jibe received laughter, applause, and cheers but Bryan returned quickly to his serious point that "your ballot is your own to do with it what you please." Any man who sold his ballot to a briber or "permits it to be wrested from him under coercion" had proven himself just as "unworthy" of American citizenship as had the employer

⁸³ Many newspapers printed the full text of Bryan's speech, including: "Nearing Pittsburgh," *The Indianapolis Journal* (Indianapolis, IN), August 11, 1896, 4, "Untitled," *The Sun* (New York, NY), August 11, 1896, 2, "Pittsburg Greets Bryan," *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), August 11, 1896, Issue 200 (daily: 20,000), "Bryan at Pittsburg," *The Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), August 11, 1896, 3; Issue 140, and "Candidate Byran," (sic) *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* (Bangor, ME), August 12, 1896, Issue 192. Even the hostile *Inter Ocean* of Chicago praised Bryan's stance against intimidation, though it could not resist comparing his remarks to his votes to repeal federal election laws during his time in Congress. "Mr. Bryan and Citizenship," *The Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), August 12, 1896, 6, Issue 141.

⁸⁴ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 69.

who coerced him. Bribery, Bryan explained to tens of thousands of cheering workingmen, insulted their manhood. Coercion was far worse, however, because it "insults your citizenship as well as your manhood."⁸⁵ The Democratic Party central organization echoed Bryan's rhetoric in a public statement denouncing coercion that month, noting that the American workingman was "too independent and patriotic" to allow his employer to make such an "insult to his manhood" by telling him who to vote for. The statement told the story of an anonymous workingman who let his boss pin a McKinley button to his coat because he felt he "cannot afford to assert the manhood in me." Yet he promised to "get even" by voting for Bryan in the secrecy of the voting booth.⁸⁶

Bryan's critique of coercion quickly expanded beyond its effect on the manhood and independence of workingmen. He framed coercion as a threat to American democracy itself. In a widely publicized speech he gave upon his return home to Lincoln, Nebraska, the day after his Labor Day address, Bryan explained that coercion "presented to the American people even a greater question than the silver question." That great question was whether the nation was ruled by people or by corporations and banks. For a man who had built his political identity on the paramount importance of the silver question, this was a dramatic concession. It reflected the seriousness with which Bryan treated the threat of coercion. The problem, Bryan explained, was

⁸⁵ "Hosts: Next President of the United States Addresses a Mighty Throng in Chicago," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), September 8, 1896, 6. Again the *Inter Ocean* took note of Bryan's speech, and while it disparaged his "misstatements," the paper praised his "opposition to coercion and bribery at the polls." "Mr. Bryan and Ballot Reform," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), September 9, 1896, 6. The *Los Angeles Herald* offered a similar sentiment: "The man who will sell his vote or be bribed of his influence is devoid of manhood. The man who falls a victim to intimidation or coercion is no less a traitor to both himself and his country." "Untitled," *The Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), August 13, 1896, 3.

⁸⁶ "Coercion The Game," *The Ohio Democrat* (Logan, OH), September 25, 1896, 2.

that coercion touched on every element of American democracy and capitalism—"If a corporation has the right to control the vote of an employee on one question, it has the right to control it on every other question."⁸⁷ Pro-Bryan newspapers echoed his rhetoric. In late-August, the New York-based *Irish World and Industrial Liberator* denounced coercion as "an innovation big with the gravest consequences to America" because it would render "universal suffrage a menace to the republic instead of a safeguard."⁸⁸ This was the "Labor Problem" all over again. If capitalism could control democracy, then democracy was doomed.

A few weeks later Bryan reinforced the threat that coercion posed to the political equality of workingmen and to American democracy more broadly in an address to the Tammany Hall faithful in their infamous New York City Wigwam. The candidate explained to the workingmen of New York that he understood "the thumbscrew processes of coercion" to which their employers were subjecting them. Bryan reminded his listeners that while employers "may have bought your labor" they "could not buy your vote... your conscience... your soul." The issue at stake when it came to coercion, Bryan asserted, was the political equality of workingmen with their bosses. To widespread applause, the great orator explained that "when you go to the ballot-box with your ballot in your hand, you are the equal of the men who hired you. You are as much a citizen and a sovereign as he or anybody else."⁸⁹ By addressing the threat that coercion posed

⁸⁷ "Bryan's Arrival In Lincoln," *The Sun* (New York, NY), September 9, 1896, 2. Also in Richard Lee Metcalfe and R. C Mindill, *The Great Fight for Free Silver: an Interesting History of the First Great Struggle In Which the Fearless And Brilliant Leader of the People Championed the Cause of Humanity In the Memorable Campaign of 1896* (Omaha, Nebraska: Edgewood Pub. Co., 1897), 409-10.

⁸⁸ The paper explained: "As universal suffrage is the basis on which our government rests, it is a matter of national concern that the individual voter shall be a free agent when he exercises the act of sovereignty known as voting." "No Intimidation," *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator* (New York, NY), August 22, 1896, 4 (weekly: 125,000).

⁸⁹ "Bryan's Speech at Wigwam," *New York Journal*, September 30, 1896, 2.

to the fragile notion of political equality among men in the United States, Bryan simultaneously raised the stakes of the election and shined a spotlight on potentially coercive employers. While speaking about coercion may have been politically advantageous for the Democratic nominee, the rhetoric he used to describe it demonstrated how seriously he took its danger to American democracy.

In its coverage of Bryan's Chicago speech and subsequent campaign travels, Hearst's *New York Journal* expressed support for the candidate's surprising contention that coercion offered just as great a threat to the nation as did an unbalanced monetary policy. The paper explained that workingmen throughout the nation were whispering to their friends much the same question that Bryan had posed: "does the man who buys, by a weekly wage, another man's labor, buy his political conviction, his rights as a citizen, and his vote as well?" This question, the *Journal* claimed, "is the one of prime importance in this campaign" as it would determine whether "a government by and for the people" would continue. Though it expected that no employer would ever openly answer in the affirmative, the paper argued that many employers were endorsing that horrid principle by placing pro-McKinley buttons on pay envelopes, forcing employees to attend "money schools," and threatening them with discharge should Bryan win. The *Journal* ran through all the other issues of the campaign, dismissing each sacred cow of democratic politics from the income tax to silver coinage to nationalization of the railroads. None, it alleged, could compare in importance to the question that coercion posed to the nation: "has a man the right to vote according to his convictions?"⁹⁰

⁹⁰ "Labor In The Campaign," *New York Journal*, September 8, 1896, 6.

The rhetoric of coercion as a threat to manhood, independence, and democracy that Bryan emphasized reached its peak two weeks before election day when his campaign manager, Senator James K. Jones (D-AR), released a series of letters formally accusing the Republican Party of encouraging and countenancing employer coercion.⁹¹ Chairman Jones' proclamation, which one Republican paper referred to as "The Coercion Manifesto," charged employers with engaging in "a concerted effort to coerce their employees into voting at the approaching election against their own convictions." Jones alleged that McKinley's campaign manager, Mark Hanna, was coordinating a national plan to get bosses to force their men to march in parades and wear pro-gold buttons. In all of these pre-election activities, Jones explained, the "threat of discharge" was "perfectly understood" by all.⁹² Jones' letter personalized the coercion issue by targeting Hanna directly, but otherwise his argument carried the same themes as Bryan's speeches on the subject by arguing that coercion threatened "the very foundations of republican government." If coercion succeeded, then "government by corporations will have succeeded government by the people." To combat coercion, Jones explained, workingmen had to "assert their manhood rights" by voting the Democratic ticket. "The salvation of the workingman" could only be accomplished

⁹¹ The weekly journal *Public Opinion* devoted the first two pages of its October 29th issue to Jones' coercion messages, Hanna's reply, and coverage of the controversy in twelve major newspapers. "The Presidential Campaign, Coercion in the Campaign," *Public Opinion* (Washington, D.C), October 29, 1896, Volume XXI, Number 18, 1-2. In its coverage of the election results the day after the election the journal published eight excerpts from newspapers from both sides debating the issue under the sub-heading: "Further Comment Upon the Claim of Coercion," "The Result of the National Election," *Public Opinion* (Washington, D.C), November 5, 1896, Volume XXI, Number 19, 3-4.

⁹² "Epistles of James," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 20, 1896, 3 and "Gives Out A Manifesto," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 20, 1896, 4.

by each workingman asserting "his rights as a free and independent American citizen" and casting his ballot as his conscience dictated.⁹³

Jones' manifesto transformed how the Democratic press treated Hanna—and by extension the McKinley campaign—by explicitly connecting him to coercion and the destruction of workingmen's manhood and independence. Before Jones raised the profile of the coercion issue, many prominent Democratic papers had focused on Hanna's fundraising efforts and how those funds could be put to use to bribe voters. Most papers had treated workplace coercion as the product of employers acting on their own initiative in response to economic and political pressures. In the last month of the campaign, however, press coverage shifted. Democratic papers increasingly argued that Hanna and the Republicans were not just benefitting from economic voter intimidation, they were directing it.⁹⁴

⁹³ "Epistles of James," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 20, 1896, 3, "Gives Out A Manifesto," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 20, 1896, 4, "Hanna on Coercion," *The Guthrie Daily Leader* (Guthrie, OK), October 29, 1896, 2, "Big Majority in Illinois," *New York Journal*, October 26, 1896, 3, "Victory In Sight," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), October 28, 1896, 2.

⁹⁴ In response, the New York Central Labor Union established a "Committee on Coercion" to "inspire confidence and assure protection" for workingmen to come forward to report on coercion by their employers. "Coercion Charges Heard in Private," *New York Journal*, October 28, 1896, 5. Newspapers as far afield as Manchester, England, reported on Jones' charge. "The Presidential Election, Growing Excitement, Alleged Republican Coercion of Working Men," *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester, UK), October 26, 1896, 6. *The Saint Paul Globe* devoted an entire page to Jones, Bryan, Hanna, and McKinley on coercion. "Is Still in Illinois," and "Spirit of Cohesion," *The Saint Paul Globe* (St. Paul, MN), October 25, 1896, 6. The coercion issue even made it into the pulpit. In Chicago the Reverend J.P. Brushingham of the Fulton Street Methodist Episcopal Church denounced "demagogues" for questioning the manhood of railroad and laboring men. They knew well enough to take the lesson of St. Paul and "be independent, manly," and free of dictation from anyone. All this was immaterial anyway, Reverend Brushingham explained, because no employer was "mean enough" to coerce his fellow man into violating his conscience. There was, he reminded his flock, "no such thing in the divine economy as coercion." In nearby Evanston Methodist Reverend Dr. Frank Bristol explained to his listeners that "the moral standard of our American business life," meaning the national currency, had to rise to the standard "of heaven." Lest his listeners miss his message that god had endorsed McKinley and the gold standard he pronounced that "one hundred-cent dollars exalteth a nation." He then encouraged everyone to get out and vote. "Coercion A Sham Cry," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 26, 1896, 7.

Hanna's aggressive fundraising from corporations had already turned him into a bogeyman who, Democratic papers alleged, would use the funds he had raised to control the election. Jones' allegations added the specter of coercion to this nefarious image. The comparison between the two political cartoons below is instructive. The *New York Journal's* depiction of Hanna published on October 8 was typical of such cartoons produced by the Democratic press during much of the campaign (Figure 7.4). Famed cartoonist Homer Davenport characterized Hanna as a wealthy but somewhat buffoonish and overfed capitalist seemingly planning to use campaign funds to bribe workingmen. At his feet lay the skull of "labor" and far behind him cowered a poor family. Hanna, as Davenport depicted him, was concerned only with his money and the votes it could buy.



Figure 7.4: The *New York Journal* and other Democratic papers delighted in depicting Hanna as an obese figure extolling the corrupt uses to which he could put his bags of campaign cash.⁹⁵

In the closing weeks of the campaign, Democratic newspapers adopted a far more explicitly confrontational stance on the coercion issue, perhaps inspired by Jones' letter or by the increasing number of well-documented incidents of coercion during October. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published a far more violent and threatening depiction of Hanna on October 30 that demonstrated how the rhetoric around coercion had shifted during the campaign (Figure 7.5).

⁹⁵ Homer Davenport, "I am Confident the Workingmen Are With Us," *New York Journal*, October 8, 1896, <http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/1008nyj.html>.

Entitled "Hanna, The Friend (?) of Labor," the cartoon maintained some of the same themes as Davenport's earlier depiction—note for example that Hanna's suit in the first cartoon and his pants in the second are both checkered with dollar signs, a depiction that Davenport popularized. Yet, in the *Post-Dispatch's* depiction, Hanna is not contemplating bribery. He stands outside a factory with terrified women and children running from armed men—presumably the families of workingmen who are being evicted. Scattered at Hanna's feet are skulls bearing the names of workplace massacres and a murdered coal miner. In his arms is a smoking gun labeled "force" and a hanging from his belt is a cavalry saber labeled "coercion."



Figure 7.5: *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* depicted Hanna as a far more violent and threatening figure.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ "Hanna, The Friend (?) of Labor," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 30, 1896, <http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/1030slpd.html>.

The threat that coercion posed to the lives and manhood of economically precarious Americans is unavoidable in the *Post-Dispatch's* cartoon. The workingmen have failed to protect their wives and children from Hanna's force and coercion and they have been driven violently from their factory-provided homes. The implication that coercion threatened the most important demand of manhood—guarding one's family—would not have been lost on its readers. Though the sword of coercion remained scabbarded, the cartoon implied that Republicans could at any moment unsheathe it and drive workingmen and their families into poverty. The shift in tone between these two cartoons exemplifies the rising attention to the coercion issue in the Fall of 1896. During the final days of the campaign, Democratic newspapers followed Jones' lead by emphasizing the threat that coercion posed to the manhood and independence of wage-working voters. The Los Angeles *Herald* summed up all these themes on election day in its call for workingmen to "Vote Early for William J. Bryan—Assert Your Manhood and Independence Thereby."⁹⁷

⁹⁷ "Now For The Wind Up—The Duty of the Citizen Today—Vote Early for William J. Bryan—Assert Your Manhood and Independence Thereby—The Result Here Certain," *The Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), November 3, 1896, 5. See also: The *Wheeling Register* of West Virginia which prefaced its announcement of polling hours by declaring "down with coercion and up with manhood and American independence." "Untitled," *Wheeling Register* (Wheeling, WV), November 2, 1896, 4. For similar examples of newspapers connecting coercion with manhood and independence see: "No Intimidation," *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix, AZ), August 2, 1896, 4, "Coercion and Intimidation," *The Evening Bulletin* (Maysville, KY), October 24, 1896, 7 (daily: 1,200), and "The Bulldozing of Wealth," *Morning Appeal* (Carson City, NV), October 7, 1896, 2.

Whiteness and Slavery in Coercion Rhetoric

By framing economic coercion as a threat to the manhood and citizenship of American workingmen, Bryan and his allies engaged with a long rhetorical tradition that had been most prominent in the labor movement in the 1870s and 1880s.⁹⁸ One element of this rhetoric that Bryan did not directly invoke, however, was how coercion threatened the racial caste status of white workingmen. In the nineteenth century United States, political equality was a right that Americans earned through their independence, their manhood, and their whiteness.⁹⁹ This ideology reinforced white supremacist efforts that were reaching their peak in the 1890s to deny African Americans political rights across the South. Democrats argued that African American men did not deserve to vote because they lacked the necessary independence and manliness to defy intimidation and cast an honest ballot. Labor advocates, reform leaders, and Democratic newspapers fought so strenuously against economic intimidation of "workingmen" because they believed that a white workingman's inability to support his chosen candidate threatened the political equality to which his white skin entitled him. Coercion threatened white racial privilege

⁹⁸ At a Labor Day address in Terre Haute, Indiana, Eugene V. Debs, leader of the American Railway Union, expressed his horror that the managers of nearly every industry had brought subtle intimidations to bear against their employees by "giving them to understand that they must vote for their own degradation, or suffer the blacklist ostracism." "Workingmen's Legal Holiday," *The Salt Lake Herald*, September 8, 1896, 2. Labor newspapers made the same argument: *The Labor Herald*, a radical labor paper from Duluth, Minnesota, contrasted Bryan himself—"a sturdy specimen of our American manhood"—with "the gagged individual who trembles in his mortgaged house lest Hanna may foreclose." A few weeks later the paper berated workingmen for being willing to give a "sacrifice of your manhood" by giving in to coercion. "Untitled," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), October 31, 1896, 8. The labor paper's brutal denigrations of the manhood of those who sacrificed their votes for economic security were meant to inspire workingmen to stand strong against coercion. The rhetoric surrounding coercion that emerged from Democratic papers and politicians in 1896 held that workingmen could only preserve their manhood by ignoring the economic consequences and voting as their hearts demanded. As one Alabama paper put it, workingmen had to "resist to the bitter end" their employers' efforts to "force them to surrender their manhood and independence" by giving up their votes to save their jobs." "Putting On The Thumbscrew," *Birmingham State Herald* (Birmingham, AL), August 2, 1896, 10.

⁹⁹ See Welke, *Law and the Borders of Belonging*.

and standing. As one prominent Democrat put it just before the election, Bryan would win "unless our race has degenerated and is ready to surrender the right of self-government" to Hanna's coercion.¹⁰⁰ For many of Bryan's supporters, the metaphor that combined all these fears—race, gender, and independence—was slavery.

Not all comparisons of slavery to coercion were explicitly racial. In several cases, pro-Bryan advocates invoked images of slavery to argue that coercion was a brutal system that robbed workingmen of their independence but did not invoke race directly. Two of the most prominent radicals in the nation made this comparison. Henry George, the apostle of the secret ballot, followed a group of workingmen on their visit to McKinley's front porch in Canton. He reported that workingmen in McKinley's hometown planned to "wear buttons or join clubs" at the command of their employers but would "express their real opinions at the polls." In this way, George explained, the workingmen would "spoil the Egyptians." In past decades George had compared coercion to African chattel slavery, Roman slavery, and Mexican peonage. The invocation of the Book of Exodus was a new metaphor for him. George possibly meant for it to emphasize that while coercive employers were cruel and demanding, their plan would fail and the enslaved workingmen would go free of their tyranny after Bryan's victory.¹⁰¹

Eugene V. Debs, leader of the American Railway Union, offered a similarly obscure metaphor for slavery in a Labor Day speech. Debs argued that by subtly convincing employees

¹⁰⁰ "Democratic Success Sure," Chauncey F. Black's Encouraging Words Regarding the Election, Great Bluffs of Mr. Hanna. Coercion by Railways and Other Corporations Makes Silver Votes. American Manhood Insulted," *Pittsburgh Daily Post* (Pittsburgh, PA), October 28, 1896, 5 (daily: 41,034).

¹⁰¹ Henry George, "Henry George Visits M'Kinley's Home Town," *New York Journal*, September 29, 1896, 12. The coercion—slavery comparison was a common trope in *The Labor World* during the campaign, for examples see: "Who Are the Anarchists," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), October 10, 1896, 1, and "Untitled," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), October 31, 1896, 9.

"that they must vote for their own degradation, or suffer the blacklist ostracism," employers were perpetuating "wage slavery" that was "worse than the Siberian curse."¹⁰² Interestingly, Debs' invocation of the despotic tendency of the Tsars of Russia to banish dissenters to Siberia was not the only comparison between coercion and Russian brutality during the campaign. The *Chicago Chronicle*, generally an anti-Bryan paper, argued that threatening to close factories and mills if Bryan won would only backfire against Republicans, as "no man with a spark of independence in his make-up will submit to the threat that is implied." The American voter who worked for wages, the paper explained, was not "a serf to be forced to deposit his ballot under a threat of the knout." The knout was a particularly brutal whip commonly used to punish serfs and criminals in Russia that to western observers had become synonymous with slavery and despotism. The *Chronicle* article was unique in its use of the knout metaphor, but by connecting coercion to life

¹⁰² "Workingmen's Legal Holiday," *The Salt Lake Herald*, September 8, 1896, 2.

Led by Debs, the ARU endorsed Bryan specifically because of the coercion issue. The powerful union denounced the "coercion of railway employees to join sound-money clubs, and calling on all wage earners to vote for Bryan." "Debsites Come Out for Bryan," *The Sun* (New York, NY), September 10, 1896, 3. In late-October Sylvester Keliher, the union's secretary, described coercion in a speech to a crowd of 5,000 labor voters as an issue which "overshadows all others." The campaign, Keliher explained, centered on the "question not of whether we shall have free silver, but whether we shall have free men." If employers could demand of workingmen "not only your labor, but your vote," then they had lost their political rights and American democracy was doomed to failure. The explicit connection in the union's endorsement between coercion of workingmen and Bryan's campaign emphasized the issue's importance to organized labor and its potential to swing votes to Bryan. By premising their endorsement and electoral support on a shared concern about the coercion issue, rather than free silver, the ARU sought to make Bryan's candidacy safe for organized labor. Though they may have been concerned about Bryan's pro-rural rhetoric, the union leaders pledged their support to him on the premise that his victory would be a rebuke to the "corporate tyranny which attempts to wrest the sacred rights of suffrage from employees." "Our Gene: E. V. Debs, Labor's Trusted Leader, Speaks to Thousands at Duluth and Superior. Sylvester Keliher also Talks to the Masses in Language that Cannot be Misunderstood. Two of the Nation's Greatest Statesmen," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), October 24, 1896, 4. "Debsites Come Out for Bryan," *The Sun* (New York, NY), September 10, 1896, 3, "Resenting Coercion," *The Dalles Times-Mountaineer* (The Dalles, OR), September 19, 1896, 2, "Debs Issues an Address," *Watertown Re-Union* (Watertown, NY), September 16, 1896, 7.

in a brutal absolute monarchy it extended Debs' Siberia comparison and made the argument that coercion undermined the existence of self-government.¹⁰³

While comparisons to Egyptian and Russian slavery emphasized coercion's threat to workers' independence, they were a few steps removed from American slavery founded on the enslavement of Africans and their descendants. *New York Journal* reporter Alfred Lewis chose a different, racially charged, metaphor when he investigated Bryan's coercion accusations in Chicago. Lewis alleged that by coercing their employees to join sound money clubs and support McKinley, employers "had established the padrone system" and were seeking to "reduce the men to the state of Mexican peons." Lewis left no doubt that he saw coercion as a threat to workingmen's racial privilege. Employers, he explained, had declared themselves in favor of "white slavery" by intimidating workers economically. Echoing decades of similar arguments from labor and reform circles, Lewis argued that the workingmen of Chicago stood to lose their whiteness as well as their citizenship if they did not defend their vote.¹⁰⁴

By far the most common comparison that Bryan's supporters made between coercion and slavery was to America's legacy of African chattel slavery. As the campaign drew to a close, Herbert L. Case, a Democratic candidate for the state Assembly from upstate New York, argued in a speech that African slavery was the closest comparison to the ongoing coercion of workingmen. Large employers who forced their employees to sign pro-McKinley rolls "under

¹⁰³ "Bulldozing Tactics," from the *Chicago Chronicle*, in the *Geneva Daily Gazette* (Geneva, NY), August 21, 1896, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis had first hand knowledge of Mexican peonage from his time living and working as a reporter in New Mexico and Nevada in his early twenties. Alfred Henry Lewis, "Democrats Certain To Carry Illinois," *New York Journal*, September 16, 1896, 8, and "View in Chicago," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), September 22, 1896, np.

pain of dismissal" were exhibiting "all the power of a southern slave holder," Case alleged. He emphasized that a coercive employer enjoyed that power without even suffering the paternal duty of having to "take care of his slave." Though Case lost the election, his rhetoric reveals the importance that coercion had assumed in 1896 campaign rhetoric. Case chose to build his most important campaign speech around the argument that Republican coercion had reduced American workingmen "to a condition worse than human slavery." This description struck a nerve. Case's comparison between African slavery and workplace coercion was the most widely quoted section of his address in press accounts.¹⁰⁵

The African slavery-coercion metaphor appeared in pro-Bryan newspapers across the nation and throughout the campaign. In August the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* denounced coercion as a "greater inhumanity" than the "foul clutch of slavery."¹⁰⁶ *The Washington Post* worried in late-October whether "chattel slavery of black men [was] abolished only to make slaves of ten times as many whites."¹⁰⁷ The radical labor paper *The Labor World* denounced a pro-McKinley parade of workingmen led by their employers as "one of the masters and their slaves" who were "marched in silence like so many chattel" and cheered at the command of their bosses.¹⁰⁸ A

Union Army veteran in Missouri wrote to his local paper that he had "helped to free the slaves,

¹⁰⁵ "On Free Silver," *Geneva Daily Times* (Geneva, NY), October 22, 1896, 1, "Democratic Rally at Bryan & Sewall Club Rooms," *Geneva Daily Gazette* (Geneva, NY), October 16, 1896, 3. For another example of a Democratic candidate denouncing coercion using a slavery metaphor see: "Democratic Mass Meeting—Judge Fleming Talks at Length to a Bryan and Sewall Club," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), September 30, 1896, 3.

¹⁰⁶ "Coercing the Labor Vote," from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in *The Houston Daily Post* (Houston, TX), August 13, 1896, 9.

¹⁰⁷ "A View That Justifies Coercion. But It Overturns the Long-cherished Theory of Free Speech," *The Washington Post*, October 28, 1896, 6.

¹⁰⁸ *The Labor World* worried that even with the protections of the voting booth "they haven't manhood enough to vote like men and true patriots" and would be rendered "slaves...under the rule of Mark Hanna" for all time. "Untitled," *The Labor World* (Duluth, MN), October 31, 1896, 13.

and now I see the lash of coercion laid on the backs of free-born white men."¹⁰⁹ These slavery metaphors rendered explicit the challenge that coercion posed to the privileges of whiteness. Lacking the economic security to defy their bosses who demanded they sign McKinley rolls, join gold parades, and wear gold buttons, white workingmen were reduced to enjoying the limited political rights of African Americans.¹¹⁰

Even shorn of explicit historical context, slavery was a potent metaphor for dramatizing coercion's threat to workingmen's independence and manhood.¹¹¹ A Minnesotan named F.C. Griswold wrote to his local newspaper in late-August, incensed that bosses were "threatening the loss of a job" by going amongst their employees "near three months before election... securing pledges of their workman's influence and vote." The first comparison that Griswold's inventive mind alighted on was European aristocrats "who feed upon others' labor, become helpless or arrogant, thrive and fatten as they make their workmen dependent, poor and helpless." By eroding the economic independence of workingmen, he alleged, such dominance destroyed their

¹⁰⁹ James E. Flynn, "Old Soldiers for Bryan," from the *St. Joseph Gazette* (St. Joseph, LA, weekly: 400) in *Mexico Weekly Ledger* (Mexico, MO), October 22, 1896, 1 (weekly: 3,000).

¹¹⁰ For examples see: "Marched Them Along Like Slaves," *Cincinnati Enquirer* (Cincinnati, OH), October 19, 1896, 2, "Untitled," *People's Voice* (Wellington, KS), August 27, 1896, 4 (weekly: 1,200), "Yes, It Is Coercion," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), October 19, 1896, 2. Other examples include: "A.R.U. and Coercion," *Deseret Evening News* (Great Salt Lake City, UT), September 11, 1896, 4 (daily: 4,400), "Hon. M.E. Lawson—A Former West Virginian Writes Entertainingly of the Silver Question," *Wheeling Register* (Wheeling, WV), October 29, 1896, 2, and "The Late Election," *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, D.C.), November 8, 1897, 1.

¹¹¹ Comparisons to other historical forms of slavery or oppression were extremely common in 1896. One paper in Arizona territory compared employers firing employees for supporting Bryan to the tortures of the inquisition: "Hunger is a great enlightener. The rack would be quicker; but that instrument, unfortunately for the cause, has been abolished." "Campaign of Education," *The St. Johns Herald* (St. Johns, Apache County, AZ Territory), August 29, 1896, 1. William Randolph Hearst wrote a letter to his own paper in September comparing coercion to European feudalism and Catholicism: "The feudal masters of the past claimed the right to dominate the religious beliefs of their subjects. The plutocratic masters of to-day claim the right to dictate the political actions of their employees. It is the same tyranny, differing only in methods." "The Journal's Fund: Workingmen Everywhere, Defying the Coercion of Employers, Are Lending Aid to their Party," *New York Journal*, September 18, 1896, 4.

manhood as well. In America, Griswold alleged, "our greatest aristocrats aspire to have coachmen with cockades, flunkeys rather than men for servants." This desire to dominate workingmen and strip them of their manliness now threatened their political rights as well. And for Griswold, as for so many commentators in 1896, the proper metaphor for a system that invalidated someone's independence and manhood was slavery: "A fit emblem of the conditions railway magnates would have, it seems to me they should make for their workmen neat, nice, iron collars, with little rings for their masters to lead them to vote." Only the protection of the secret ballot stood between American workingmen and this awful fate. In the privacy of the voting booth, Griswold explained, "alone as an independent man he can cast a freeman's vote... a man's view of his rights or wrongs, be a master instead of a servant."¹¹²

Lewis compared coercion to Mexican peonage, Debs and the *Chicago Chronicle* to Russian despotism and serfdom, George to biblical bondage, and a plethora of politicians and papers compared it to African slavery. Common to these comparisons was the certainty that coercion eroded the independence, whiteness, and manhood of American workingmen. This was far from the first time that these themes had emerged around the issue of voter coercion. Labor leaders, socialist advocates, newspapers, and politicians of all parties had argued throughout the 1870s and 1880s that coercion threatened the "first citizen" status of white workingmen by striking at these pillars of their privilege.¹¹³ The recurrence of these themes in 1896 reflected the

¹¹² F.C. Griswold of Minneapolis, MN, Letter to the Editor: "Bossing the Workmen: An Indignant Protest," *The Representative* (St. Paul, MN), August 26, 1896, 4. In a similar example a pro-Bryan Maryland paper described coercion as reducing workingmen and poor homeowners to "blind slaves moving up like cattle driven into the shambles." "The Bulldozers Campaign," *The Midland Journal* (Rising Sun, MD), October 2, 1896, 2 (weekly: 750).

¹¹³ Welke, *Law and the Borders of Belonging*, 2.

legacy of the coercion crisis even after the secret ballot rendered economic voter intimidation less effective. Despite technological innovations and efforts by Democratic and Republican politicians to make the coercion of employees politically illegitimate, the rhetoric of the crisis of coercion continued to suffuse American political culture in 1896.

The Republican Response

Newspapers and politicians opposed to Bryan's campaign contested every specific accusation of coercion levied against employers. Notably, though they were aware that Democrats were practicing economic voter intimidation against African Americans in southern states, Republican newspapers did not make rhetorical use of the seeming hypocrisy of their opponents. While after the election one Virginia Republican ultimately used evidence of employer coercion to overturn the results in a congressional election, during the campaign Republicans generally denied that economic voter intimidation was happening at all.¹¹⁴ In conflicted and sometimes contradictory ways, the Republican response to Democratic accusations echoed the same rhetorical themes as their opponents. Republican papers and politicians emphasized that coercion threatened the independence, manhood, and whiteness of American workingmen... that is, it would, if it were happening. Since it was not, the Democratic allegations that workingmen were vulnerable to coercion were, from the Republican perspective, a tremendous insult to the manhood and staunch independence of American workingmen.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Report in the Contested Election Case of R.T. Thorp v. Sydney P. Epes*, 55th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1898, Report No. 428, 10-11. For another example of Republican accusations of Democratic economic intimidation made after the election see: "Coercion In North Carolina," *New-York Tribune*, November 19, 1896, 6.

The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* provided the most explicit summary of the threat that workingmen's supposed susceptibility to coercion posed to their political equality in early-October. The paper described a pro-Bryan march in Chicago in which some men wore masks so their employers would not recognize and discharge them. This dramatic choice had been completely unnecessary, the paper claimed, because "the truth is, American citizens are not coerced. The capability to resent coercion is evidence of capacity for citizenship."¹¹⁵ In this simple statement the *Eagle* summarized all the arguments and rhetoric of the coercion crisis. If wage working men were capable of resisting the undue influences of their bosses, then they were safe repositories of the franchise.¹¹⁶ Thus, any implication that workingmen were succumbing to coercion was an insult to their citizenship.

The capability to resist coercion was dependent, Republican newspapers made clear, on the manhood and economic independence of workingmen. Accusations that workingmen had submitted to coercion posed, a group of railwaymen in Illinois put it, "an insult to our intelligence and our manhood." Though they had formed a "sound money club," the railwaymen claimed they had acted in "absolute independence" from their employers and had not been at all coerced.¹¹⁷ A Minnesota railroad conductor linked manliness to economic independence by

¹¹⁵ "An Allegation of Hollow Humbug," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), October 10, 1896, 6 (daily: 51,000).

¹¹⁶ A pro-Bryan paper echoed this rhetoric if not the sentiment, arguing that standing against intimidation from his boss proved that a workingman "was a true American citizen." "Brought to Justice—Coercing and Bulldozing Voters for McKinley," *The Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), November 3, 1896, 6.

¹¹⁷ "Club Notes," *The Railway Age*, October 2, 1896, 6. The *Cincinnati Commercial-Tribune* asserted that there were no "higher types of manhood" than that shown by the workingmen who refused to march in sound money parades. The paper disparaged those who would profess to support McKinley to save their jobs as "poor, weak men" for failing to "stand up like men" and declare they supported Bryan even if it cost them their jobs. "Club Notes," *The Railway Age*, October 30, 1896, 8.

explaining that accusing railwaymen of succumbing to coercion was "unmanly," since they were sure to "have a little money set aside" for emergencies and thus were not fully dependent on their bosses for their families' survival.¹¹⁸ By emphasizing that citizenship rights were tied to manliness and economic independence, these papers supported the *Eagle's* contention that giving in to coercion undermined workingmen's political equality with their employers. They also inadvertently supported Bryan's argument that coercion posed an existential threat to American democracy. If white wage workers were not capable of exercising the duties of citizenship because of the coercion of their employers, then universal manhood suffrage truly did not have a future in the United States.

Employers, particularly in the railroad industry, sounded a similar note about the relationship between resistance to coercion and political equality. President Chauncey Depew of the New York Central Railroad denied Bryan's Labor Day accusations of coercion by asserting that the ability of his employees to disagree with him politically was what marked them as equal citizens. When it came to Depew's railroad, "the trackwalker has the same political privileges as the president" and could vote for whomever they wanted. Depew naturally resented the "insult to the manhood and independence" of American workingmen that he saw in the claim that they could be coerced.¹¹⁹ President Melville E. Ingalls of the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad promised

¹¹⁸ "How 'Coercion' Talk is Working," *The Railway Age*, October 16, 1896, 8. See also: "Bryan Insults—To the Workingmen Denounced by Railroad Employees—They Resent Impeachments—Of their Manhood in the Talk About 'Coercion,'" *The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer* (Wheeling, WV), October 30, 1896, 1 (daily: 5,200), "No Bulldozing on the B. & O.," *The Citizen* (Frederick City, MD), October 9, 1896, 4 (weekly: 900), "Coward's Counsel From Sheehan," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 28, 1896, 1, "Rights of Employer and Employee," *San Francisco Call*, September 28, 1896, 6, and "Desperate Tactics," *The San Francisco Call*, October 22, 1896, 6.

¹¹⁹ "Chauncey Depew on Coercion," *The Railway Age*, September 18, 1896, 218. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.c2538105?urlappend=%3Bseq=282>.

his employees that if they voted for Bryan "against what we consider to be the best interests of the Chesapeake & Ohio, and anyone discharges you for so voting, come to me and I will discharge the man who discharged you and put you back."¹²⁰ Ingalls' pledge was met with applause, but it reflected the precariousness of workingmen in 1896.¹²¹ Both Depew and Ingalls ignored the fact that economically precarious workingmen enjoyed political equality solely because their employers chose not to abuse their total control of the workplace. Implicit in Depew's denial of Bryan's accusation of coercion, in Ingalls' promise to protect his employees, and in the anger of pro-McKinley workingmen in response to any suggestion that they might submit to coercion was an admission that workingmen had only a fragile hold on their political rights. Depew and Ingalls may have chosen not to coerce their employees, but they could just as easily have chosen to do so with little likelihood of suffering prosecution. The fact that the right of wage working men to support who they chose in the 1896 campaign and election depended on the goodwill of their bosses was a stark demonstration of their precariousness. The fears of labor leaders, socialists, and reformers in the 1870s and 80s had seemingly been proven correct: wage

¹²⁰ "'Coercion' on the Big Four," *The Railway Age*, September 25, 1896, 6. For other examples see: "'Coercion' on the C. B. & Q" *The Railway Age*, September 25, 1896, 6, and "Over 10,000 In Line—Great Demonstration By Railway Men In Cincinnati," *The Indianapolis Journal*, October 18, 1896, 4.

¹²¹ George H. Baker, publisher of the monthly *Baker's Railway Magazine* (New York, NY), wrote a defense of the political involvement of railroad bosses. Baker sent a draft of his pamphlet to William McKinley in the hope that the Republican National Committee would republish it to a wider audience. He was specifically responding to Eugene Debs' accusations that railroad bosses were coercing their employees to support McKinley. Baker repeated Ingalls' pledge to protect his workers from political discharge and argued: "In no case have the employees been threatened with loss of employment or wages, other than as a direct consequence of the sure decrease of traffic and income, and the equally sure increase of expenses for supplies, and to meet fixed charges." George H. Baker to William McKinley, October 3, 1896, William McKinley Papers: Series 1, General Correspondence and Related Items, -1902; , Sept. 6-1897, Feb. 22. 1847. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Image 559. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss322680001/>.

workers were not secure repositories of the franchise if their ability to freely express their political opinions was dependent on the whims of their bosses.

Chairman Jones' late-October attack on McKinley and Hanna inspired the loudest and most virulent Republican replies. The Chicago *Inter Ocean* explained in a huff that during the summer, when the coercion charge had been "made by irresponsible camp followers it was not worthy of such attention." Now that the formal apparatus of the Democratic Party had backed the coercion conspiracy theory, however, Republican leadership had to respond.¹²² Breathless press coverage forced Mark Hanna himself to answer the "very grave charge." In a statement that seems to have been more widely published than Jones' initial letter, Hanna pronounced that he took Jones' coercion claim as "an insult, both to employer and employees." He denied that employers were so "despotic" or employees so "cringing" that coercion was even possible in the United States. Hanna turned the language of anti-coercion advocates back on themselves, asserting that coercion simply could not be happening in the United States because it was a "despotic usurpation of rights of a free citizen" and no American workingman would permit such a thing to happen.¹²³ On October 24, McKinley, who had never before mentioned coercion in his many speeches from his Canton front porch, vigorously denied Jones' allegations. The candidate

¹²² "Mark Hanna on Coercion," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 23, 1896, 6. One telling example from a major national newspaper: "The talk of coercion merely shows that the Bryanites are beaten on every other subject, and what is more to the point, that they realize it. Some of the more charitably inclined declare that Jones's essay on coercion reads very much like the effort of one who is fixing a soft place upon which to fall." "Bryanites Are For Riot," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 21, 1896, 1.

¹²³ "Jones Rebuked By Hanna," *The Sun* (New York, NY), October 22, 1896, 1. The *Penny Press* spun Hanna's statement by alleging that he was frightened by the exposure of his scheme. "Hanna Frightened," *Penny Press* (Minneapolis, MN), October 21, 1896, 1.

explained that his campaign was not about "coercion of employee by employer" but the "cohesion between employees and employers" that would help to bring back prosperity.¹²⁴

The Republican politicians' replies to the coercion charge, once it was made formally by Jones, largely echoed the arguments their newspapers had been making for months.¹²⁵ Not only was coercion not a significant issue, they claimed, it was an insult to the manhood and independence of workingmen to even raise the concern.¹²⁶ In response to Jones' claim that giving in to coercion threatened the manhood of workingmen, Republican newspapers retorted that Jones' assertion itself was "an imputation on the manhood and self-respect of American

¹²⁴ "Charges of Coercion," *The Washington Post*, October 25, 1896, 1. See also: "Came From Far And Near," *The Austin Weekly Statesman* (Austin, TX), October 29, 1896, 8 (weekly: 5,000), "A Great Day at Canton," *The Diamond Drill* (Crystal Falls, Iron County, MI), October 31, 1896, 8.

¹²⁵ Republican newspapers waged an aggressive defense of employers who were accused of coercion, denouncing such claims as "a ridiculous story" in large measure because of the secret ballot's protections. "All Work Suspended: O.I. Company Waits for the Result of the Election," *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 14, 1896, 5. Also published in the staunchly Republican "Merely for Capital," *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), Saturday, August 15, 1896, 3. See also: "Just How It Happened," *The Norfolk Virginian* (Norfolk, VA), August 19, 1896, 2 (daily: 6,103), "Untitled," *The Mitchell Capital* (Mitchell, SD), August 21, 1896, 2 (daily: 1,250), "Lies Nailed," *Union County Courier* (Elk Point, SD), August 27, 1896, 5 (daily: 750), "No Let or Hindrance," *Kansas City Daily Journal* (Kansas City, MO), August 25, 1896, 2, "Must Pay Demurrage," *The Indianapolis Journal* (Indianapolis, IN), August 28, 1896, 6, "Facts as to Harrison County," *Omaha Daily Bee* (Omaha, NE), August 22, 1896, 5 (daily: 23,369), *The Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), August 16, 1896, 12, "Multiple News Items," *Bismarck Daily Tribune* (Bismarck, ND), August 22, 1896, 2 (daily: 600).

¹²⁶ For examples see: "The Failure of a False Cry," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 28, 1896, 6, "Hanna On Coercion Cry," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 21, 1896, 3, "Jones' Cowardly Manifesto," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 24, 1896, 12, and "The Governor Roasted—A Sharp Letter From His Old-Time Friend, George B. Sperry," *The San Francisco Call*, November 2, 1896, 3.

workingmen."¹²⁷ This echoed Hanna's assertion that employees were not so "cringing" as to submit to coercion. Ignoring the economic and political context that surrounded workingmen during the contentious campaign, former President Benjamin Harrison declared that any employee subjected to coercion should simply "assert his manhood then and there," and vote for whoever he wanted.¹²⁸ American workingmen, the Republican response held, were manly and independent. The imputation that they would submit to coercion was the true crime, not coercion itself.

Railwaymen marching in a pro-McKinley parade in Chicago a few days after Jones' accusation carried a variety of banners and posters denying coercion. Some were straightforward: "There Is No Coercion Used With Us." Others approached pith: "We Are Coerced—Nit." One invoked images of bondage: "Do You See Any Ropes On Us?" And of course one banner relied on an assertion of manly appearance to deflect the coercion charge: "Do We Look Like Men Who Had Been Coerced?"¹²⁹ The railwaymen's banners vividly demonstrated that coercion was an intolerable accusation because it impugned the independence, manhood, and thus citizenship of workingmen.

¹²⁷ "Bryan's Coercion Lie Exposed," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 20, 1896, 6. Other papers used nearly identical language, arguing that workingmen would interpret the claim that they would give in to coercion as an "imputation put upon their honor" and an "insult to their manhood." "The Cry of Coercion," from the *Chicago Times-Herald* in *The Diamond Drill* (Crystal Falls, Iron County, MI), October 24, 1896, 8. Another good example framed the issue around the threat that free silver posed to railroad workingmen and their families: "Intimidated? Yes, intimidated by wife and children at home. Intimidated by the thought of further idleness and less wages. Intimidated by fear of inability to meet calls on the loan on his home. Intimidated by the fear that he would have to stop payment on his life insurance. Here is the coercion; here is the intimidation which for the first time is making a compact body of three-fourths of a million men at work on the railroads." "Intimidation," from the *Louisville Post*, in the *The Washington Post*, October 29, 1896, 6.

¹²⁸ "The Issue of Coercion," *New York Journal*, October 27, 1896, 6.

¹²⁹ "Railway Men's Day in Chicago," *The Railway Age*, October 30, 1896, 2.

After a week of vigorous debate over the nature and definition of coercion, the *Inter Ocean* comfortably dismissed it all as a joke. With a caustic wink, the paper compared the coercion that "Brother Bryan is complaining about" to an incident where Democratic toughs had thrown rotten eggs at Secretary of the Treasury John Carlisle and to a claim that parents in Chicago were "coercing their children into attending Barnum & Bailey's circus."¹³⁰ Employees who submitted to coercion, the paper argued, were as dependent and politically unequal as children. Though Republican responses to coercion accusations, like the *Inter Ocean's*, were often fundamentally dismissive, they consistently employed the same tropes as did Democratic papers and politicians, just in reverse. The themes of independence, manhood, and to a lesser extent, whiteness, that had shaped the rhetoric surrounding coercion in the 1870s and 1880s returned with a vengeance in the 1896 campaign. The issue of coercion and the threat it posed to manhood suffrage and the wage labor system were just as important to the participants in the 1896 presidential campaign as were the fights over silver and gold coinage.

Conclusion

The workingmen of America, coerced or not, did not did not elevate Bryan to the White House. He lost by over 600,000 votes nationwide. Bryan and Jones both claimed after the fact

¹³⁰ "Multiple News Items," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), October 27, 1896, 6.

that the election result was marred by "coercion practiced by corporations and employers."¹³¹

Their post-facto accusations carried little weight at the time or in scholarly accounts since. As generations of historians noted, it is unlikely that the coercion of employees by their employers was a decisive factor in the outcome of the election of 1896. However, other assumptions made by scholars—that coercion was a campaign issue raised by the Bryan campaign only late in the cycle, that coercion did not constitute a real concern for voters, that Democratic intimidation of African American voters in the South balanced out economic coercion in the North, and that the secret ballot rendered coercion ineffective and unimportant—have proven faulty.

Employers unduly influenced their employees in 1896 because they were truly scared of what Bryan's election might mean for their business prospects. Because of the new protections offered by the secret ballot, employers developed new methods to control the political expression of employees in the weeks before election day. The protections of the secret ballot, while revolutionary, were too new for workingmen to entirely trust. Moreover, the invasive surveys, money schools, McKinley buttons, and parades that employers forced on their employees circumvented the secret ballot's protections entirely. The atmosphere of fear and pressure that pervaded the 1896 campaign convinced workingmen who had been subjected to intensive intimidation by their employers just a few years earlier and were terrified of unemployment that it was not safe to defy their bosses at the polls. As the *New York Journal* explained just before

¹³¹ "Late News by Wire, *Washington Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), November 6, 1896, 2, W.J. Bryan, "Letter From Mr. Bryan: Tells His Followers Their Cause Is Not Dead," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 7, 1896, 3, "Chairman Jones Hears the News," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1896, 1, "Quits At Last: Chairman Jones is Out of the Claiming Business," *Detroit Free Press*, November 6, 1896, 1, General Master Workman Sovereign of the Knights of Labor also charged "coercion of employees and farmers alike during the late campaign" shortly after election day. "Sovereign on the Campaign," *Rock Island Argus* (Rock Island, IL), November 11, 1896, 1 (daily: 1,800).

election day, when employers told their employees that they would cut their wages if Bryan won, "the wage workers of the country believe this. They fear the power of their taskmasters."¹³²

Rhetorically, coercion became an important campaign issue in 1896 because it perfectly fit the fears of both parties. Bryan and the Democratic press may well have embraced the coercion issue cynically, but it did fit extant fears and concerns that animated much of the coalition they hoped to bring to the polls on election day. The threat that coercion posed to the manhood, independence, citizenship, and whiteness of ordinary workingmen was real. Labor and reform advocates had spent decades fighting for the secret ballot by arguing that it would ensure that universal manhood suffrage and the capitalist wage labor system could coexist. If, as *The Brooklyn Eagle* put it on October 10, 1896, "the capability to resent coercion is evidence of capacity for citizenship," then there could be no more important issue in American politics than economic voter intimidation.¹³³ The coercion campaign of 1896 threatened to undermine the political equality of white male wage workers, the substrate that America's increasingly not universal experiment in manhood suffrage was built on. If poor white men had become convinced that industrial capitalism was threatening their racial and gender privilege, either democracy or capitalism in the United States could have come to a swift and revolutionary end.

¹³² "The Issue of Coercion," *New York Journal*, October 27, 1896, 6. After the election, Congressman Samuel Maxwell, a Populist from Bryan's home state of Nebraska, introduced a bill in the House "To punish the corruption, coercion, or intimidation of voters." Maxwell's bill threatened a year in prison if "any person who as creditor, master, employer, overseer, or agent shall use any coercion or intimidation to procure any elector who is his debtor or under his authority to vote contrary to the inclination of such elector or to deter him from voting at any election." Apparently concerned that the word of the coerced employee would not be trusted in such a case, Maxwell included in the bill the statement that "the person threatened or deterred shall be a competent witness in the case." The House took no action on the bill after it was introduced. U.S. Congress, House, *A Bill To Punish the Corruption, Coercion, or Intimidation of Voters at Elections Held in Pursuance of the Laws of the United States*, HR 4580, 55th Cong., 2nd Sess., introduced in House December 10, 1897.

¹³³ "An Allegation of Hollow Humbug," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), October 10, 1896, 6.

To an extent that historians have not acknowledged, coercion—both in reality and in rhetoric—was a central issue of the 1896 campaign. Most accounts of the campaign emphasize the battle over currency standards and rural-urban divide that Bryan's rhetoric exposed and exacerbated. Yet, as Bryan himself stated in early September, the ability of corporations to control the votes of their employees "presented to the American people even a greater question than the silver question."¹³⁴ The possible existence of widespread economic voter intimidation despite the spread of ballot secrecy brought home to thousands of wage working Americans just how precarious their political rights were. The threat that coercion posed to the manhood, independence, and racial standing of American workingmen was existential. For many observers, the coercion issue rapidly overtook currency reform as the most important element of the campaign. During the last week before election day, dozens of small Democratic newspapers across the Midwest carried the same article that made explicit the centrality of coercion to the campaign. Entitled "Coercion and Intimidation," the article described the nature and extent of workplace coercion and quoted from one of Bryan's speeches on the subject. When it came time to place the ongoing campaign in historical context these Democratic papers spoke with one voice: "this campaign will be known in history as the campaign of coercion."¹³⁵

¹³⁴ "Bryan's Arrival In Lincoln," *The Sun* (New York, NY), September 9, 1896, 2.

¹³⁵ Representative examples: "Coercion and Intimidation," *Muscatine News-Tribune* (Muscatine, IA), October 24, 1896, 3 (daily: 900), "Coercion and Intimidation," *Lead Daily Call* (Lead, SD), October 24, 1896, 1, "Coercion and Intimidation," *The Owensboro Messenger* (Owensboro, KY), October 24, 1896, 7, "Coercion and Intimidation," *Marion County Democrat* (Salem, IL), October 30, 1896, 5 (weekly: 1,400), "Coercion and Intimidation," *Chippewa Herald-Telegram* (Chippewa Falls, WI), October 25, 1896, 3 (weekly: 1,000), "Coercion and Intimidation," *Logansport Pharos-Tribune* (Logansport, IN), October 22, 1896, 17 (daily: 1,400), "Coercion and Intimidation," *Telegraph-Forum* (Bucyrus, OH), October 30, 1896, 4 (weekly: 1,900).

While coercion in 1896 did not destroy American democracy or capitalism, thousands of workingmen who had experienced or heard about economic voter intimidation during the campaign would never forget it. A story made the rounds of labor newspapers after the election about a furniture worker who had been laid off shortly after the election. The man came to his foreman in confusion and explained that he had been promised "permanent employment if McKinley was elected." Fearing discharge, he had voted Republican in November. The voter's foreman had little sympathy for the confused laborer. The foreman remarked that if he had voted for McKinley in reaction to a promise of permanent employment then the solution was simple, the discharged worker should "go to McKinley and get a job."¹³⁶

¹³⁶ "Points From The Press," from the *Grand Rapids Workman*, in the *Labor Advocate* (Birmingham, AL), July 24, 1897, np (weekly: 1,247).

Conclusion: The End of the Coercion Crisis

Between 1873 and 1890, economic voter intimidation was a persistent force in American elections, workplaces, political movements, and legislatures. The economic precariousness of wage working men, open ballots and ineffective anti-intimidation laws, and extremely close and vitriolic elections dramatically increased the incidence of voter coercion. Employers throughout the nation threatened their employees with economic consequences if they did not vote as their bosses demanded. They then followed their employees to the polls and watched as they cast their ballots. Employers' mere presence at the polls constituted a threat that workingmen with families at home and winter on the way could not afford to ignore. In company towns, where employers had near-total control over the economic and social lives of their employees, those methods of coercion were even more effective. And in navy yards, bosses combined bribery and intimidation to realize hundreds of votes for their chosen candidates. Economic intimidation worked by preying workingmen's fear and vulnerability and by exploiting weaknesses in election laws that forced voters to cast their ballots in full view of their employers.

The number of people being intimidated at the polls by their bosses increased when the Panic of 1873 drove thousands of workingmen into unemployment, but it was the identity of those who were newly facing workplace coercion that sparked a crisis. Economic voter intimidation became a national crisis because it interlaced with even larger challenges that the nation faced in this era over race, democracy, and capitalism. In the mid-1870s, just as the coercion of white workingmen became increasingly common throughout the nation, the Democratic campaign to violently overthrow Reconstruction's experiment in biracial democracy

was reaching its zenith. In response to Republican investigations and rhetorical attacks on southern methods, Democratic politicians and newspapers cynically used popular concern about rising rates of economic voter intimidation for political gain. They argued that this form of coercion was an entirely northern and Republican problem afflicting primarily white men. By the early-1880s Democratic papers were confidently asserting that because Republicans practiced economic intimidation against white workingmen in the North, they could not claim the moral high ground and impugn southern violence against African Americans. By insisting that the exemplar of the coerced workingman was a white northern factory or mill worker threatened by his tariff-reliant boss—not a freedman threatened by violent white supremacists—Democrats were able to delegitimize Republican efforts to enforce voting rights protections for African Americans. This rhetorical campaign also shaped how politicians and activists sought to combat economic voter intimidation. Northern industrial states like Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York passed secret ballot laws earlier than other states because it was in those states that both the real and rhetorical crisis of coercion was most pronounced. Southern states lagged decades behind northern states in enacting ballot secrecy in part because the Democratic newspapers and politicians had warped the rhetoric of the coercion crisis to focus solely on the North.

Economic voter intimidation also interlaced with the omnipresent "labor question," which referred to the growing concern that democracy and capitalism could not coexist. In the 1870s and 1880s, Americans of all classes and parties worried that the near-simultaneous rise of universal manhood suffrage and wage-labor industrial capitalism would undermine one or both

of those burgeoning institutions. The coercion of workers by their bosses at the polls was the "labor question" in microcosm. It activated the fears of workingmen and labor advocates that the economic precariousness inherent in wage labor would damage the independence, and therefore the manhood and whiteness, of enfranchised workingmen. These concerns were layered on top of politicians' and capitalists' fears that if workingmen lost faith in peaceful political reform they would embrace violence, socialism, or anarchism. Exploiting workers' economic dependence to control their votes was, a Democratic politician told a crowd in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1883 "an outrage upon the rights, the independence and the manhood of every laboring man." Economic voter intimidation, the speaker proclaimed, was the "muzzling of the weak by the strong, the heel of the employer upon the franchise of his workingmen."¹ As coercion recurred in seemingly every election, many Americans worried that economic voter intimidation threatened the existence of American democracy by extending the dictatorial power of the workplace into the democratic refuge of the polling place.

To combat such fears and prevent democracy from destroying capitalism, or vice versa, many insisted that economic voter intimidation had to be stopped. Labor and reform advocates, most notably Henry George and Terence Powderly, and radical and socialist political parties fought for ballot secrecy to protect employees from their employers' gaze at the polls. The secret ballot promised to solve all the problems raised by the crisis of economic voter intimidation. Most importantly, it guaranteed that workingmen's lack of economic independence would not undermine their right to vote, thereby securing their threatened manhood. The secret ballot also

¹ The speech was delivered by the Port of Boston's Customs Collector, W.A. Simmons, a Benjamin Butler supporter and staunch Democrat. "Missionary Work, *Boston Daily Globe*, October 22, 1883, 2.

decreased the potency of arguments made by socialist and labor parties that workingmen should identify politically with their class. When employers were forcibly connecting laborers' workplaces to their polling places it was hard to escape the impression that voters' class standing mattered politically. As the *Boston Globe* explained in 1892, thanks to the secret ballot, "implied threats and penalties are futile. The wage-earner can vote as he thinks right without the fear of 'civilized bull-dozing' tactics in any form."² Ballot secrecy promised to protect both wage-working voters from their bosses and industrial capitalism from the wage working classes.

On a practical level, by breaking the chain of information between an employer, his employee, and that employee's vote, the secret ballot made it far more difficult for a boss to control the votes of his employees. In critical early-adopting states like New York and Connecticut, arguments for ballot secrecy succeeded when they were framed as ways to stop economic intimidation. Yet, because ballot secrecy was enacted on the state, not federal, level it did not interfere with the white supremacist overthrow of Reconstruction governments in the South. In the years that followed, southern states belatedly introduced the secret ballot, but with the intent of diminishing voter access, rather than protecting vulnerable workingmen.

Increased ballot secrecy, renewed economic precariousness, and the continued tension between universal manhood suffrage and industrial wage labor crashed together dramatically—and finally—during the presidential election of 1896. The unique threat that William Jennings Bryan seemed to pose to capitalists convinced them to coerce their employees as never before. But with ninety-two percent of voters protected by ballot secrecy, their methods had to change.

² "Amplly Vindicated," *Boston Daily Globe*, November 12, 1892, 4.

During the 1896 campaign, employers engaged in extensive discharge threats and sought to control the political expression of their employees, but they lacked the ability to oversee their votes on election day. Democratic politicians and newspapers reactivated the rhetoric that coercion was a threat to the manhood, whiteness, and independence of workingmen. Republicans denied that economic intimidation was taking place, but they concurred that the ability to vote free of outside influence marked a man as worthy of the rights of citizenship. Though the rhetorical themes were not entirely new, the intensity and extent of the discussion of coercion in 1896 converted the election into a referendum on coercion. The results on election day proved to workingmen and their bosses that the secret ballot offered effective protection in even the most highly charged of partisan circumstances. As memories of the widespread economic intimidation of the 1880s faded and confidence in the secret ballot's protections grew, workingmen began to defy threats from their employers. For their part, employers shifted their efforts to influence policy away from controlling individual voters and towards lobbying legislators directly.

In the aftermath of the 1896 election, the House Committee on Elections reassessed its standards on what constituted illegal intimidation. For decades, the House had relied on the standard popularized by Congressman George McCrary in 1875 that defined intimidation as "a display of force as ought to have intimidated men of ordinary firmness."³ In 1897, the Republican majority on the committee, in the course of investigating intimidation of African American voters in Louisiana, realized that decades of economic voter intimidation had rendered that standard unworkable. The committee officially "recognized the fact that coercive measures

³ George W. McCrary, *A Treatise on the American Law of Elections*, First Edition (Keokuk, Iowa: R.B. Ogden, Chicago: E.D. Myers., 1875), 314.

do not operate alike upon all voters." A voter's "condition of dependance or independence," the Committee explained, was a critical factor in whether an act or statement that "would have no effect whatever upon one class might, nevertheless, exert an irresistible influence upon another class." The Committee explained that understanding the effect of intimidation on an election required studying context and power dynamics. For the first time the Committee acknowledged that "preceding occurrences," sometimes weeks before election day, could combine with threats at the polls to create a coercive atmosphere even if no one at the polls was threatening violence.⁴

The Committee on Elections' revelation that the context—the "whole environment" surrounding a voter—was relevant to determining whether the voter was being intimidated was certainly long overdue. The Committee's new definition of intimidation was everything that labor activists, ordinary workingmen, and Democratic politicians had spent decades advocating for. It recognized non-violent forms of coercion, emphasized that dependence lowered defenses against undue influence, assessed the effect of coercive acts that occurred before election day, and emphasized that certain threats worked differently against voters of different classes.

The Democratic minority on the committee, however, virulently opposed the new standard. They denounced it as an illegitimate partisan maneuver by the majority Republicans. Because the majority proposed the standard with the goal of combatting the violent and economic intimidation of African Americans in the South, not white workingmen in the North, it did not fit within the long-established and racist boundaries of coercion rhetoric. The desire for

⁴ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Chester H. Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest of all the Contested Elections in the House of Representatives of the United States from the First to the Fifty-sixth Congress, 1789-1901*, 56th Cong., 2d Sess., 1901, Doc. No. 510, 527 and Asher C. Hinds, *Hinds' Precedents of the House of Representatives of the United States—Volume I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907), 232.

party advantage and the enforcement of white supremacy were stronger pressures in the Democratic Party of the 1890s than its members' desire to limit economic voter intimidation. When asked to choose between white rule in the South and the protection of workingmen's ability to express themselves politically nationwide, the Democrats on the House Committee on Elections chose white supremacy.

Despite Congress' new standard for investigating intimidation and the public backlash to the alleged coercion of workingmen in 1896, the practice did not come to an end after that contentious election. During the 1900 presidential election, Bryan and Democratic newspapers again accused McKinley and his backers of carrying out coercion. However, unlike in 1896, the conditions underlying the coercion crisis were no longer in effect. Recovery had succeeded recession and imperialism had replaced silver as the national obsession. While Bryan still posed a threat to the Eastern business establishment, he no longer seemed to threaten the existence of American capitalism. In 1896 there were numerous specific, documented, and confessed instances of employer coercion or undue influence that provided grist for the increasingly hyperbolic newspaper accounts. In 1900, there were far fewer such incidents and proportionately far less discussion of the issue during the campaign.⁵ The election of 1896 also inaugurated an era of dramatically reduced party competition in which what historian Alexander Keyssar

⁵ A telling example, Bryan gave a speech in Baltimore towards the end of the 1900 campaign and made this assertion: "If a man threatens to discharge you because you vote the democratic ticket tell him that if this country is as prosperous as republicans say it is you ought not to have any trouble getting another job. (laughter.) And, my friends, if conditions are such that a man having employment does not go where he can get another job, if he loses his present job, then conditions are nothing to brag of in this country. When will you be stronger to assert and defend your manhood? When the trusts have the monopoly of all industries and when you have to go on your knees to the ground and ask some trust magnate for your daily bread it will be too late." "Bryan Sorrows for Nation," *Omaha Daily Bee* (Omaha, NE), October 24, 1900, 5.

described as "the apocalyptic language of late-nineteenth-century politics" transformed into a "more metallic and optimistic language" of political debate.⁶ For the next thirty years, Republicans largely controlled the national government while Democrats entrenched absolute power in the South.⁷

When a Democratic paper accused the Chicago stockyard bosses of coercing their employees during the 1900 presidential election, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* responded dismissively that such things were no longer a problem. There had been "so much said for so many years about the 'coercion' and 'intimidation' of wage-earners by their employers," the *Tribune* argued, that employers were "nervously anxious to avoid doing anything which may even faintly resemble an attempt to influence the votes of those who work for them." Employers were so worried about being accused of coercing their employees after the events of 1896 that they refused to distribute any political messages to their employees. The *Tribune* claimed that employers had to "lean backwards" to prevent their employees or any outside observers from suspecting them of coercion. Because of the secret ballot, employers knew the "futility" of trying to threaten their employees into voting for a particular candidate. When each workingman repaired to the safety of his voting booth, the *Tribune* reminded its readers, he would "do as he pleases, and nobody can find out what it has pleased him to do." Considering the protections of

⁶ Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 95.

⁷ As just one measure of the lack of competitiveness at even the lowest levels of government, political scientist Paul Kleppner found that, outside of the South, 70.6 percent of representatives elected to state legislatures between 1894 and 1904 were Republicans. Paul Kleppner, "From Ethnoreligious Conflict to 'Social Harmony': Coalitional and Party Transformation in the 1890s," in Lipset, Bass, Lipset, ed., *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1978), 46. See also Williams, *Realigning America*, 169.

the secret ballot and the "sturdy, independent nature of American workingmen," employers believed that threatening their employees' livelihoods would simply rebound against their favored candidates. The *Tribune* argued that the combination of the secret ballot with the increased press and political attention paid to economic voter intimidation in the aftermath of 1896 meant that "really, the employers and not the employees are the ones who are intimidated."⁸

At the end of the nineteenth century, the coercion of workingmen was no longer considered a threat to the stability of American democracy or capitalism, but it did not disappear from American elections. In the South in particular, economic voter intimidation never receded. While white supremacists primarily employed violence and legal disenfranchisement to drive African Americans from the polls after Reconstruction, economic threats remained in the repressive toolbox. Ballot secrecy came to many southern states decades later than northern states. The secret ballot certainly had regressive effects on poor and illiterate voters because it could operate as a de facto literacy test. Yet southern states already had de jure literacy tests. And grandfather clauses, polls taxes, lengthy residence requirements, and eventually, white primaries. While the secret ballot was sometimes an element of the white supremacist disenfranchisement campaign, it was not a keystone of that effort and it was often enacted only belatedly. African Americans and working class whites who tried to vote in these states were often subjected to the blatant discharge threats and observation at the polls that had ceased to exist in the North.⁹

⁸ "Rubbish About 'Coercion,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1900.

⁹ Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860-1910* (University of Georgia Press, 1997).

In 1898, nearly a decade after most of the nation adopted ballot secrecy, its protections still had not been extended to North Carolina. During the congressional election that year an African American teamster named West Ray stepped up to the entrance of the town store of Ivy, North Carolina, to cast their ballots. Ray intended to vote Republican, but he was intercepted outside the polls by W.R. Manney, the store owner. Manney caught Ray by the arm, held out three dollars, and reminded Ray that "you know who you are working for." Ray instantly understood the threat to his livelihood, telling a Republican poll watcher "that if I vote Republican he won't let me drive no longer." Despite the threat, Ray tried to return the money and continue to the polls, but a crowd of Democrats "bulldozed" him, keeping him away from the polling window by force for over half an hour until the polls closed with the setting sun. The combination of economic and physical intimidation with short polling hours and the lack of ballot secrecy kept men like Ray precarious at the polls until law, custom, and the threat of violence drove them from it. North Carolina would not adopt the secret ballot until 1929, and by then almost no African Americans were able to vote in the state.¹⁰

Outside the South, the rhetoric of the Gilded Age crisis of economic voter intimidation proved to have a long half-life in American political culture. Labor unions, because of their members' painful experience with coercion in the late-nineteenth century, continued through the 1920s to accuse employers and their Republican allies of practicing economic voter intimidation

¹⁰ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections, *Richmond Pearson v. William T. Crawford Contested Election Case Report*, 56th Cong., 1st Sess., 1900, Report No. 199, 11-13.

of various kinds.¹¹ When economic precariousness and fears that capitalism was under threat recurred during the Great Depression, economic voter intimidation surged as a political issue. With the nation again seemingly poised at the brink in 1932, progressive Democrats in Wisconsin charged that employers had resorted to discharge threats to coerce workers to vote for reactionary candidates. Democratic newspapers knew exactly what specter to invoke to denounce the "shameless campaign of coercion" that workingmen had been subjected to: "Mark Hanna has come back."¹² Driven from power by Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, Republicans rediscovered the coercion accusation in 1936, arguing that "WPA workers have been herded almost like cattle and made to register Democratic under the lash and at least the threat of losing their jobs."¹³ The rhetoric of workers being herded like cattle to the polls by their employers would have fit in perfectly into the discourse surrounding coercion in the 1870s and 1880s. By the mid-twentieth century, Gilded Age economic voter intimidation, and particularly the dramatic

¹¹ The railroad labor unions, inheritors of Eugene V. Debs' legacy, connected possible instances of coercion to the 1896 election whenever possible. Most remarkably attributing Calvin Coolidge's 1924 landslide banks threatening famers in the Midwest that if Coolidge lost their loans would be called in. "Never since Mark Hanna's day was coercion indulged in so openly and effectively." "The Old, Old Story of Intimidation and Purchase," *The Lincoln Herald* (Lincoln, NE), November 14, 1924, 1, and "Labor Sounds New Battle Cry," *The Journal Times* (Racine, WI), November 8, 1924, 2.

¹² "Coercion, Terrorism in Wisconsin," *The Arkansas City Leader* (Arkansas City, KS), September 29, 1932, 2. Former Democratic presidential nominee James M. Cox gave a speech just before election day denouncing how "industrial leaders are called upon to coerce their employees under threat of loss of jobs." This method, he explained, dated back to "Mark Hanna's days." "Text of James M. Cox's Address," *The Cincinnati Enquirer* (Cincinnati, OH), November 2, 1932, 8. Henry Ford sent a circular letter to his employees telling them "to prevent times from getting worse and to help them get better, President Hoover must be elected." One paper commented "that sounds like an echo of the old Mark Hanna days, when the great corporations resorted to coercion of their employees on a national scale. Workingmen are more independent now than the were back in 1896, however, and the secret ballot is now a law in all the states." Joe T. Lawless, "The Unofficial Observer," *The Windsor Beacon* (Windsor, CO), November 3, 1932, 3.

¹³ "Edge Charges WPA Workers Forced to Vote Democratic," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (Fort Worth, TX), October 18, 1936, 8.

accusations of the 1896 campaign, had become a cliché to be trotted out for use as a sly dig in a letter to the editor.¹⁴

Between 1873 and 1896 economic voter intimidation shaped lives, workplaces, polling places, governments, and laws. It influenced the national political discourse on Reconstruction, industrialization, and the contingent expansion of suffrage to all men. The debates over coercion's threat to workingmen's manhood, independence, and racial privilege echoed in political culture for decades. For the labor leaders, reformers, and ordinary workingmen who fought long and hard to disconnect the authoritarianism of the workplace from the promised equality of the polling place, the widespread adoption of ballot secrecy and the end of endemic economic coercion was an epochal event. For men like the prisoners in the Elmira Reformatory who in 1890 had told their instructor how much they hated being forced to choose "between voting as their employers said and being turned out" of their jobs, the enactment of the secret ballot meant far more than a mere legal protection. One prisoner had asked his instructor about his practical options when a powerful employer threatened a precarious workingman with discharge in a time of economic and political upheaval. Desperately he asked "what else could a man do?"¹⁵ Now, he could vote.

¹⁴ In the height of irony, both of these examples of letters to the editor invoked the specter of coercion to defend virulently conservative Republicans—Robert Taft and Clarence Manion. Oscar Stankey, Letter to the Editor, "Coercion of Senator Taft," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 6, 1947, 16, Edward W. Focke, Letter to the Editor, "Double Standard?," *Dayton Daily News* (Dayton, OH), February 27, 1954, 4.

¹⁵ "Where Crime is Cured," *The Sun* (New York, NY), May 17, 1891, 27.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archival Collections

American Antiquarian Society

Collection of Election Ballots: 1827-1889

Bowdoin University: George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives

Brunswick, Maine

Thomas Brackett Reed Collection

Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library

New York Chamber of Commerce and Industry Records

Jackson County, Missouri, Historical Society Archives

George Washington McCrary Collection

Library of Congress. Washington, DC.

Asher Hinds Papers

William McKinley Papers

National Archives. Center for Legislative Archives. Washington, DC.

House of Representatives Committee on Elections Papers

Beattie v. Price

Benoit v. Boatner

Bowen v. Buchanan

Bromberg v. Haralson

Chalmers v. Manning

Coleman v. Buck

Hill v. Catchings

Kernaghan v. Hooker

Kidd v. Steele

Mitchell v. Walsh

Moore v. Funston

Mudd v. Compton

Reynolds v. Shonk

Sullivan v. Felton

Watson v. Black

New York Public Library. Manuscripts and Archives Division. Astor, Lenox, Tilden Foundations
 National Civic Federation (NCF) Archive
 Levi Parsons Morton Papers
 Timothy Shaler Williams Papers
 David B. Hill Papers
 Ivins Family Papers
 Henry George Papers
 Albert S. Bard Papers
 James Schoolcraft Sherman Papers

San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park Research Center
 Bethlehem Steel Corporation, Shipbuilding Division. Union Iron Works Collection. John
 W. Dickie Records

University of California: Berkeley. The Bancroft Library Archives
 Spring Valley Water Company Records

Government Documents

Congressional Globe

Congressional Record

Donsanto, Craig C. and Nancy L. Simmons, and United States Department of Justice. Public Integrity Section, *Federal Prosecution of Election Offenses*. 7th Ed., Rev. Aug. 2007. ed. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Public Integrity Section, 2007.

New York State Senate. "Brief for the Contestant, Hon. M.F. Collins." submitted March 28, 1892, in *Proceedings and Testimony Taken before the New York Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, Senate Chamber, Capitol, in the matter of contesting the election of John H. Derby, of the sixteenth senatorial district*.

Public Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut in the Year 1877. Hartford: The Case, Lockwood, and Brainard Co., Printers, 1877.

Sanger, George P. editor. "The Statutes at Large and Proclamations of the United States of America, From March 1871 To March 1873, and Treaties and Postal Conventions." Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1873.

State of Connecticut. "An Act regulating the Election of Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Senators, Members of the House of Representatives, Treasurer and Secretary." Act of June 15, 1846, ch. 20, 1846 Connecticut Public Acts 20.

- _____. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, January Session, 1884*. Printed under the direction of Allan W. Paige, Clerk. Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, Co., 1884.
- _____. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, January Session, 1886*. Printed under the direction of Austin Brainard, Clerk. Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, Co., 1886.
- _____. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, January Session, 1887*. Printed under the direction of Samuel A. Eddy, Clerk. Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, Co., 1889.
- _____. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Connecticut, January Session, 1887*. Printed under the direction of W. McConville, Clerk. Hartford: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard, Co., 1887.
- _____. *Message of His Excellency Morgan G. Bulkeley, Governor of Connecticut to the General Assembly Session of 1889*. Hartford: The Press of Case, Lockwood, and Brainard Company, 1889.
- "The Socialist Labor Party Of North America: Platform Adopted by the Sixth National Convention." at Buffalo, N.Y., September 1887. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/slp/1887/plat1887.pdf>.
- U.S. Congress, House of Representatives. *A Bill To Punish the Corruption, Coercion, or Intimidation of Voters at Elections Held in Pursuance of the Laws of the United States—HR 4580, 55th Cong., 2nd Sess.*, introduced in the House December 10, 1897.
- _____. Bartlett, D.W. *Digest of Election Cases. Cases of contested elections in the House of Representatives, from 1865 to 1871*. 41st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1870, Misc. Doc. 152.
- _____. Ellsworth, J.H. *Digest of Election Cases. Cases of contested elections in the House of Representatives, Forty-Fifth and Forty-Sixth Congresses, from 1876 to 1880*. 47th Cong., 1st Sess., 1883, Misc. Doc. 57.
- _____. *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of General Depression in Labor and Business; and as to Chinese Immigration*. 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 5.
- _____. *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of the General Depression in Labor and Business, etc.* 45th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1879, Mis. Doc. No. 29.
- _____. *Report of the Industrial Commission on the Relations and Conditions of Capital and Labor Employed in Manufactures and General Business, Including Testimony so far as*

Taken November 1, 1900, and Digest of Testimony—Volume 7. 56th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1901, Mis. Doc. No. 495.

_____. Rowell, Chester H. *A Historical and Legal Digest of all the Contested Elections in the House of Representatives of the United States from the First to the Fifty-sixth Congress, 1789-1901.* 56th Cong., 2d Sess., 1901, Doc. No. 510.

U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Elections. *Frank J. Sullivan v. Charles N. Felton Contested Election Case Report.* 50th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1888, Report No. 3538.

_____. *Papers in the Case of James H. Platt, Jr. vs. John Goode Jr. Contested Election.* 44th Cong., 1st Sess., 1876, Mis. Doc. No. 65.

_____. *Papers in the Case of Josiah G. Abbott vs. Rufus S. Frost Contested Election.* 44th Cong., 1st Sess., 1876, Mis. Doc. No. 49.

_____. *Report in the Case of Ignatius Donnelly vs. William D. Washburn Contested Election.* 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1880, Report No. 1791.

_____. *Report in the Contested Election Case of Frank H. Hurd v. Jacob Romeis.* 49th Cong., 1st Sess., 1886, Report No. 1449.

_____. *Report in the Contested Election Case of Henry Bowen v. John A. Buchanan.* 51st Cong., 1st Sess., 1890, Report No. 1214.

_____. *Richmond Pearson v. William T. Crawford Contested Election Case Report.* 56th Cong., 1st Sess., 1900, Report No. 199.

_____. *Sebastian Duffy v. Joseph Mason Papers and Documents for the Twenty-Fourth Congressional District of New York.* 46th Cong., 1st Sess., 1879, Misc. Doc. 23.

_____. *Report in the Contested Election Case of R.T. Thorp v. Sydney P. Epes.* 55th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1898, Report No. 428.

_____. *Testimony in the Contested Election Case of Samuel J. Anderson vs. Thomas B. Reed.* 47th Cong., 1st Sess., 1881, Mis. Doc. No. 13.

U.S. Congress, Senate. *Inquiry into Alleged Election Outrages in Mississippi, in 1883—Testimony Part 2.* 48th Cong., 1st Sess., 1884, Report No. 512/2.

_____. *Report from the Committee of the Committee on Privileges and Elections on the Alleged Massacre of Colored Men at Danville.* 48th Cong., 1st Sess., 1884, Report No. 579.

_____. *Senate Select Committee to Inquire into the Alleged Frauds in the Late Elections.* 46th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1880, Report No. 497.

_____. *Testimony as to the Denial of Elective Franchise in Mississippi at the Elections of 1875 and 1876*. 44th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1877, Mis. Doc. No. 45.

_____. *Testimony on Municipal Election at Jackson, Mississippi*. 50th Cong., 1st Sess., 1888, Mis. Doc. No. 166.

_____. *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee—Volumes 1, 2, and 3*. 48th Cong., 1885.

Books, Pamphlets, and Published Tracts

Bernheim, Abram C. "The Ballot in New York." *Political Science Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1889): 130-52.

Bishop, Joseph B. "The Secret Ballot In Thirty-Three States." *Forum*, January 1892.

Electoral Reform: With the Massachusetts Ballot Reform Act and New York (Saxton) Bill. New York: The Society for Political Education, 1889.

George, Henry. *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth*. Originally published in 1879. New York, Random House, The Modern Library: 1929.

Harrison, Lynde. "Article I.—The Connecticut Secret Ballot Law." *New Englander and Yale Review* Vol. 16, Iss. 242 (May 1890).

Hinds, Asher C. *Hinds' Precedents of the House of Representatives of the United States—Volume I*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907.

Hoadly, George. "Methods of Ballot Reform." *Forum*, August 1889, 623.

Ivins, William M. "Address and Paper on Electoral Reform." in *Proceedings of the Twenty-ninth Annual Meeting of the New York State Bar Association, held at Alba New York, NY, January 16-17, 1906*. Albany: The Argus Company Printers, 1906.

Johnson and Porter. eds., "National Party Platforms, 1840-1972." (1973). http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=4067

Lord & Thomas, Newspaper Advertising. *Lord & Thomas' Pocket Directory for 1894-5: Complete list of newspapers, magazines and periodicals in the United States and Canada, omitting such as do not insert advertisements*. Chicago: Blakely & Rogers, Printers and Binders, 1895.

Ludington, Arthur. "Present Status of Ballot Laws in the United States." *The American Political Science Review* 3, no. 2 (1909).

Mattinson, Miles Walker and Stuart Cunningham Macaskie. *The Law Relating to Corrupt Practices at Elections and the Practice on Election Petitions*. London: Waterlow and Sons Limited, London Wall, E.C., 1883.

McCrary, George W. *A Treatise on the American Law of Elections*. First Edition. Keokuk, Iowa: R.B. Ogden, Chicago: E.D. Myers., 1875.

Metcalf Richard Lee. and R. C Mindill. *The Great Fight for Free Silver: an Interesting History of the First Great Struggle In Which the Fearless And Brilliant Leader of the People Championed the Cause of Humanity In the Memorable Campaign of 1896*. Omaha, Nebraska: Edgewood Pub. Co., 1897.

Platform und Constitution der Soz. Arbeiter-Partei angenommen auf der 5ten. National-Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, am 5., 6., 7. und 8. October 1885. Socialistic Library no. 1, January 1, 1886. New York: National Executive Committee of the Socialistic Labor Party, 1886.

Powderly, Terence Vincent. *The Path I Trod; the Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1940.

Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Convention of the Socialist Labor Party Held At Grand Central Palace, July 4th to July 10th, 1896. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b5199726>.

Reed, Thomas B. "The Federal Control of Elections." *The North American Review*, Vol. 150, No. 403 (June, 1890): 671-680.

"The Employment Contract And The Employer's Liability," *American Economic Association*. August 1907; 8, 3.

"The New Method of Voting," *The Andover Review; a Religious and Theological Monthly*. Vol. 11, Iss. 63 (March 1889).

Tiffany, Walter Checkley and William Lawrence Clark. *Handbook On the Law of Persons And Domestic Relations*. St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Co., 1896.

White, William Allen. *The Autobiography of William Allen White*. New York: Macmillan, 1946.

Wigmore, John H. *The Australian Ballot System as Embodied in the Legislation of Various Countries, With an Historical Introduction*. Boston: Charles C. Soule, 1889.

Newspapers and Magazines

Alexandria Gazette (Alexandria, D.C.)
American Nonconformist, The (Indianapolis, IN)
Anaconda Standard, The (Anaconda, MT)
Andover Review; a Religious and ological Monthly, The (Boston, MA)
Argus and Patriot (Montpelier, VT)
Arizona Republican (Phoenix, AZ)
Arkansas City Leader, The (Arkansas City, KS)
Atlanta Constitution, The
Atlantic Monthly, The
Austin Weekly Statesman, The (Austin, TX)
Bangor Daily Whig & Courier (Bangor, ME)
Banner-Democrat, The (Lake Providence, LA)
Barton County Democrat (Great Bend, KS)
Birmingham State Herald (Birmingham, AL)
Bismarck Daily Tribune (Bismarck, ND)
Boston Daily Advertiser (Boston, MA)
Boston Globe
Boston Herald, The
Brooklyn Citizen, The (Brooklyn, NY)
Brooklyn Daily Eagle
Butler Weekly Times, The (Butler, MO)
Butte Weekly Miner, The (Butte, MT)
Cambria Freeman, The (Ebensburg, PA)
Central Law Journal, The (St. Louis, MO)
Century Illustrated Magazine (New York, NY)
Century Magazine, The
Charlotte Democrat (Charlotte, NC)
Charlotte Democrat, The (Charlotte, NC)
Charlotte Observer (Charlotte, NC)
Chicago Times-Herald
Chicago Tribune
Chippewa Herald-Telegram (Chippewa Falls, WI)
Christian Union, The (New York, NY)
Cincinnati Enquirer

Citizen The (Frederick City, MD)
Clarion-Ledger (Jackson, MS)
Comet, The (Johnson City, TN)
Commercial Advertiser (Potsdam Junction, NY)
Corrector, The (Sag Harbor, NY)
Cosmopolitan, The (New York, NY)
Daily Argus/ Rock Island Argus, The (Rock Island, IL)
Daily Arkansas Gazette (Little Rock, AR)
Daily Cairo Bulletin, The(Cairo, IL)
Daily Capital Journal (Salem, OR)
Daily Evening Bulletin (Maysville, KY)
Daily Evening Bulletin (San Francisco, CA)
Daily Gazette, The (Wilmington, DE)
Daily Herald, The (Brownsville, TX)
Daily Intelligencer, The (Wheeling, WV)
Daily Leader (Davenport, IA)
Daily Leader, The (Gloversville, NY)
Daily Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA)
Dalles Times-Mountaineer, The (Dalles, OR)
Davis County Clipper (Bountiful, UT)
Delaware Ledger, The (Newark, DE)
Deming Headlight (Deming, NM)
Democratic Advocate, The (Westminster MD)
Democratic Northwest and Henry County News (Napoleon, OH)
Denver Evening Post
Deseret Evening News (Great Salt Lake City, UT)
Detroit Free Press
Diamond Drill, The (Crystal Falls, Iron County, MI)
Elizabethtown Post, The (Elizabethtown, NY)
Emporia Daily Gazette (Emporia, KS)
Enterprise, The (Wellington, OH)
Evening Bulletin, The (Maysville, KY)
Evening Journal (Wilmington, DE)
Evening Post, The (New York, NY)

Evening Star (Washington, D.C.)
Forest Republican, The (Tionesta, PA)
Fort Worth Star-Telegram (Fort Worth, TX)
Forum (New York, NY)
Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper (New York, NY)
Freeland Tribune (Freeland, PA)
Geneva Daily Gazette (Geneva, NY)
Geneva Daily Times (Geneva, NY)
Grand Rapids Workman (Grand Rapids, MI)
Great Falls Leader, The (Great Falls, MT)
Guthrie Daily Leader, The (Guthrie, OK)
Harper's Weekly
Hartford Courant
Helena Independent, The (Helena, MT)
Herald, The (Los Angeles, CA)
Houston Daily Post, The (Houston, TX)
Independent, The
Indiana State Sentinel, The (Indianapolis, IN),
Indianapolis Journal, The (Indianapolis, IN)
Indianapolis News
Inter Ocean (Chicago, IL)
Irish Standard, The (Minneapolis, MN)
Irish World and American Industrial Liberator (New York, NY)
Iron County Register (Ironton, MI)
Ithaca Daily Journal (Ithaca, NY)
Jamestown Weekly Alert, Jamestown, ND)
Journal Times, The (Racine, WI)
Judge
Kansas City Daily Journal (Kansas City, MO)
Kansas City Star
Ketchum Keystone, The (Ketchum, ID)
Labor Advocate (Birmingham, AL)
Labor Herald, The (Richmond, VA)
Labor World, The (Duluth, MN)

Lancaster Daily Intelligencer (Lancaster, PA)
Lincoln Herald, The (Lincoln, NE)
Lead Daily Call (Lead, SD)
Littell's Living Age (Boston, MA)
Logansport Pharos-Tribune (Logansport, IN)
Los Angeles Daily Herald
Los Angeles Times, The
Maine Farmer (Augusta, ME)
Manchester Guardian, The (Manchester, UK)
Marion County Democrat (Salem, IL)
Meeker Herald, The (Meeker, CO)
Memphis Daily Appeal (Memphis, TN)
Mexico Weekly Ledger (Mexico, MO)
Midland Journal, The (Rising Sun, MD)
Milwaukee Sentinel, The (Milwaukee, WI)
Mitchell Capital, The (Mitchell, SD)
Monist, The
Morning Appeal (Carson City, NV)
Morning News, The (Savannah, GA)
Muscatine News-Tribune (Muscatine, IA)
National Republican (Washington, D.C.)
National Review, The (London, UK)
Nebraska Independent, The (Lincoln, NE)
New Englander and Yale Review
New Haven Daily Morning Journal and Courier (New Haven, CT)
New York Journal
New York Times
New York World, The
New-York Tribune
Newport Daily News (Newport, RI)
News and Observer, The (Raleigh, NC)
News, The (Paterson, NJ)
Norfolk Virginian, The (Norfolk, VA)
North American Review, The

Ogdensburg Journal, The (Ogdensburg, NY)
Ohio Democrat, The (Logan, OH)
Olean Herald (Olean, NY)
Omaha Daily Bee (Omaha, NE)
Our Mountain Home (Talladega, AL)
Overland Monthly (San Francisco, CA)
Owensboro Messenger, The (Owensboro, KY)
Penny Press, The (Minneapolis, MN),
People's Voice (Wellington, KS)
Phrenological Journal and Science of Health, The (New York, NY)
Pioche Weekly Record, The (Pioche, NV)
Pioneer Express, The (Pembina, ND)
Pittsburgh Daily Post (Pittsburgh, PA)
Pittsburgh Times (Pittsburgh, PA)
Press, The (Stafford Springs, CT)
Prince George's Enquirer and Sourn Maryland Advertiser, The (Upper Marlborough, MD)
Progressive Farmer, The (Winston, NC)
Public Ledger (Memphis, TN)
Public Opinion (Washington, D.C.)
Railway Age, The (Chicago, IL)
Representative, The (St. Paul, MN)
Richmond Dispatch, The (Richmond, VA)
Roanoke Daily Times, The (Roanoke, VA)
Rocky Mountain News (Denver, CO)
Sacramento Record-Union, The (Sacramento, CA)
Salt Lake Herald, The
San Francisco Alta Californian
San Francisco Call
San Francisco Chronicle, The
San Francisco Examiner
Scranton Tribune, The (Scranton, PA)
Seattle Post-Intelligencer, The
Shenandoah Herald (Woodstock, VA)
Sound Money (Massillon, OH)

South Bend Herald (South Bend, IN)
Spectator, The (London, UK)
Springfield Daily Republic (Springfield, OH)
St. Johns Herald, The (St. Johns, Apache County, AZ Territory)
St. Joseph Gazette (St. Joseph, LA)
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
St. Paul Daily Globe (Saint Paul, MN)
Stark County Democrat, The (Canton, OH)
Sun, The (Baltimore, MD)
Sun, The (New York, NY)
Telegraph-Forum (Bucyrus, OH)
Times, The (Owosso, MI)
Topeka State Journal, The (Topeka, KS)
Truth (New York, NY)
Union County Courier (Elk Point, SD)
Valley Virginian (Staunton, VA)
Vermont Watchman, The (Montpelier, VT)
Vindicator (Cicero, IL)
Washington Post, The
Waterbury Evening Democrat (Waterbury, CT)
Watertown Herald, The (Watertown, NY)
Watertown Re-Union (Watertown, NY)
Weekly Advertiser, The (Montgomery, AL)
Weekly Democrat, The (Natchez, MS)
Weekly Examiner, The (New Haven, CT)
Weekly News and Courier, The (Charleston, SC)
Wheeling Register (Wheeling, WV)
Windsor Beacon, The (Windsor, CO)
Workmen's Advocate (New Haven, CT)
Wyoming County Times (Warsaw, NY)
Yale Law Journal (New Haven, CT)
Yorkville Enquirer (Yorkville SC)
Youth's Companion, The (Boston, MA)

Secondary Sources

- Algeo, Matthew. *The President Is a Sick Man: Wherein the Supposedly Virtuous Grover Cleveland Survives a Secret Surgery at Sea and Vilifies the Courageous Newspaperman Who Dared Expose the Truth*. 1st ed. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011.
- Altschuler, Glenn C. and Stuart M. Blumin. "Limits of Political Engagement in Antebellum America: A New Look at the Golden Age of Participatory Democracy." *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 3 (1997): 855-85.
- Argersinger, Peter H. "New Perspectives on Election Fraud in the Gilded Age." *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 4 (1985): 669-87.
- Ashby, LeRoy. *William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987.
- Barnes, Kenneth C. "Who Killed John M. Clayton? Political Violence in Conway County, Arkansas, in the 1880s." *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1993): 371-404.
- Barnett, Vincent M. "Contested Congressional Elections in Recent Years." *Political Science Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (1939): 187-215.
- Barreyre, Nicolas. "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 4 (2011): 403-23.
- Bass, Herbert J. *"I Am a Democrat": the Political Career of David Bennett Hill*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1961.
- Beckert, Sven. *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896*. Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Bensel, Richard. *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Bernstein, Samuel. "American Labor in the Long Depression, 1873-1878." *Science & Society* 20, no. 1 (1956): 59-83.
- Burke, Albie. "Federal Regulation of Congressional Elections in Northern Cities, 1871-94." *The American Journal of Legal History* 14, no. 1 (1970): 17-34.
- Calhoun, Charles W. *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age*. 1st ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.

- Campbell, Tracy. "Machine Politics, Police Corruption, and the Persistence of Vote Fraud: The Case of the Louisville, Kentucky, Election of 1905." *Journal of Policy History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 269-300.
- Carson, Jamie L. and Jason M. Roberts, "Strategic Politicians and U.S. House Elections, 1874–1914." *The Journal of Politics* 67, no. 2 (2005): 474-96.
- Cohen, Nancy. *Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Cox, Gary W. and J. Morgan Kousser. "Turnout and Rural Corruption: New York as a Test Case." *American Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 4 (1981): 646-63.
- Cronin, Sean. "The Rise and Fall of the Socialist Labor Party of North America." *Saothar* 3 (1977): 21-33.
- Currarino, Rosanne. *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age. Working Class in American History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.
- _____. "The Politics of "More": The Labor Question and the Idea of Economic Liberty in Industrial America." *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 17-36.
- Engstrom, Erik J. and Samuel Kernell. *Party Ballots, Reform, and the Transformation of America's Electoral System*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Ely, Richard T. *Recent American Socialism*. Baltimore: N. Murray, Publication Agent, Johns Hopkins University, 1884.
- Fels, Rendigs. "The Long-Wave Depression, 1873-97." *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 31, no. 1 (1949): 69-73.
- Fink, Leon. *The Long Gilded Age: American Capitalism and the Lessons of a New World Order*. Philadelphia, US: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.
- Foley, Edward. *Ballot Battles: The History of Disputed Elections in the United States*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- _____. "Reconstruction Revisited." *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): 82-100.
- Fortier, John C. Norman J. Ornstein. "The Absentee Ballot and the Secret Ballot: Challenges for Election Reform." *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 483-516.

- Fredman, Lionel E. *The Australian Ballot: The Story of an American Reform*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1968.
- Glickman, Lawrence B. *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*. Ithaca, New York; London, [England]: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Grant, Steve. "The Year that Connecticut Elected Nobody Governor," *Hartford Courant*. November 3, 2002. <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2002-11-03-0211032496-story.html>.
- Green, Matthew N. "Race, Party, and Contested Elections to the U.S. House of Representatives," *Polity* 39 (2) (2007).
- Harpine, William D. *From the Front Porch to the Front Page: McKinley and Bryan in the 1896 Presidential Campaign*. 1st ed. Presidential Rhetoric Series; No. 13. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005.
- Heckelman, Jac C. Andrew J. Yates. "Incumbency Preservation Through Electoral Legislation: The Case of the Secret Ballot." *Economics of Governance* (2002) 3: 47–57.
- Heckelman, Jac C. "The Secret Ballot and the Market For Votes: Economic Incentives Of A Secret Ballot." Ph.D. Diss., University of Maryland, 1994.
- Henry, Sarah M. "Progressivism and Democracy: Electoral Reform in the United States, 1888-1919." Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 1995.
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Francis Newton. *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.
- Holt, Michael F. *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876*. Lawrence: U of Kansas, 2008.
- Jenkins, Jeffery A. "Partisanship and Contested Elections in the House of Representatives, 1789-2002," *Studies in American Political Development* 18 (2004).
- Jentz, John B. and Richard Schneirov. *Chicago in the Age of Capital: Class, Politics, and Democracy during the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Josephson, Matthew. *The Politicos, 1865-1896*. 1st ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938.
- Kazin, Michael. *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.
- Keyssar, Alexander. *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

- Kleppner, Paul. "From Ethnoreligious Conflict to 'Social Harmony': Coalitional and Party Transformation in the 1890s," in Lipset, Bass, Lipset, ed., *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics*. San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1978.
- Kousser, J. Morgan. *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-party South, 1880-1910*. Yale Historical Publications. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.
- Kuo, Didi and Jan Teorell. "Illicit Tactics as Substitutes: Election Fraud, Ballot Reform, and Contested Congressional Elections in the United States, 1860-1930." *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 5 (April 2017): 665–96.
- Lee, Frances E. "Patronage, Logrolls, and 'Polarization': Congressional Parties of the Gilded Age, 1876-1896." *Studies in American Political Development* 30 (October 2016): 116-127.
- Leip, David. "1884 Presidential General Election Results-Connecticut," Dave Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections. <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?year=1884&fips=9&f=1&off=0&elect=0>.
- Lepore, Jill. "Rock, Paper, Scissors: How We Used To Vote." *New Yorker*. October 6, 2008, printed in the October 13, 2008 issue. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/10/13/rock-paper-scissors>.
- Lott, Jr., John R. and Lawrence W. Kenny. "Did Women's Suffrage Change the Size and Scope of Government?" *Journal of Political Economy* 107, no. 6 (1999): 1163-198.
- Lubetkin, John M. *Jay Cooke's Gamble: The Northern Pacific Railroad, the Sioux, and the Panic of 1873*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.
- McCormick, Richard Patrick. *The History of Voting in New Jersey; a Study of the Development of Election Machinery, 1664-1911*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953.
- McGerr, Michael E. *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Miller, Edward H. "They Vote Only for the Spoils: Massachusetts Reformers, Suffrage Restriction, and the 1884 Civil Service Law." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8, no. 3 (2009): 341-63.
- Montgomery, David. *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Murphy, Kevin. *Crowbar Governor: The Life and Times of Morgan Gardner Bulkeley*. Driftless Connecticut Series. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010.

- Newman, Patrick. "Late 19th and Early 20th Century United States Business Cycles and Monetary Policy." Ph.D. Diss., George Mason University, 2016.
- Nitschke, Christopher. "Theory and History of Financial Crises: Explaining the Panic of 1873." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 17 (2018): 221–240.
- O'Donnell, Edward T. *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, "Robert Luce," <https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/17214>.
- Palermo, Patrick F. "The Rules of the Game: Local Republican Political Culture in the Gilded Age." *The Historian* 47, no. 4 (1985): 479-96.
- Perman, Michael. *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Quigley, David. *Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction and the Making of American Democracy*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2004.
- Reynolds, John Francis and Richard L. McCormick. "Outlawing 'Treachery': Split Tickets and Ballot Laws in New York and New Jersey, 1880-1910." *The Journal of American History* 72, no. 4 (1986): 835-58.
- Reynolds, John Francis. *Testing Democracy: Electoral Behavior and Progressive Reform in New Jersey, 1880-1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Rosenbloom, Joshua L. *Looking for Work, Searching for Workers: American Labor Markets during Industrialization*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Schneirov, Richard. "Uncovering the Contradictions in Samuel Gompers's 'More:' Reading 'What Does Labor Want?'" *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18 (1) (2019): 99–119.
- Schneirov, Richard. "Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873—1898." *Journal of Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5 (July 2006): 189-224.
- Silverman, Robert A. "Nathan Matthews: Politics of Reform in Boston, 1890-1910." *The New England Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1977): 626-43.
- Smith, Carl S. *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

- Smith, Stacey L. "Emancipating Peons, Excluding Coolies: Reconstructing Coercion in the American West," in Downs, Gregory P. and Kate Masur, *The World the Civil War Made*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015, 46-75.
- Stern, Clarence A. *Resurgent Republicanism: The Handiwork of Hanna*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1963.
- Summers, Mark Wahlgren. *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- Swibold, Dennis L. *Copper Chorus: Mining, Politics, and the Montana Press, 1889-1959*. Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society Press, 2006.
- Valelly, Richard M. *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement*. American Politics and Political Economy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Vernon, J.R. "Unemployment Rates in Postbellum America: 1869–1899." *Journal of Macroeconomics* 16, no. 4 (1994): 701-14.
- Volokh, Eugene. "Private Employees' Speech and Political Activity: Statutory Protection Against Retaliation." *Texas Review of Law & Policy*, Vol. 16, 295-336.
- Waksmundski, John. "Governor McKinley and the Workingman." *The Historian* 38, no. 4 (1976): 629-47.
- Wang, Xi. *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860-1910*. University of Georgia Press, 1997.
- Weir, Robert E. "A Fragile Alliance: Henry George and the Knights of Labor." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 56, no. 4 (1997): 421-39.
- Welke, Barbara Young. *Law and the Borders of Belonging in the Long Nineteenth Century United States*, New Histories of American Law. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- White, Richard. *The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Williams, R. Hal. *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896*. American Presidential Elections. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2010.