



## Blue State Blues: The End of the Secret Ballot

Joel B. Pollak

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The secret ballot is a relatively recent innovation.

As *Smithsonian* magazine noted in 1998, it was not widely adopted until after the 1888 election, when Republicans in Indiana stole the presidency from incumbent Grover Cleveland.

Then as now, the electorate was closely divided, and party operatives in Benjamin Harrison's home state made sure he won — by hook and by crook. (Sound familiar, Pennsylvania?) Cleveland came back in 1892, after a “ballot-reform landslide swamped the nation's legislatures.”

The secret ballot became an international standard for democratic elections. The United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the United States ratified in 1992, provides that elections “shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors.”

That is, *by law*, the United States recognizes that a secret ballot is necessary for a free election because people may not express in public what they would in the privacy of the voting booth.

The secret ballot largely survived in the U.S. — until this year.

The 2020 presidential election involved the sudden adoption of vote-by-mail across much of the country. Voting by mail requires that a name be attached to the envelope around a ballot (or a second envelope around that one). It is *partially* secret.

Absentee voting already existed, on a much smaller scale. A few states also had adopted vote-by-mail in recent years. (Notably, these are states in which Republicans have found it increasingly difficult to win elections.)

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Democrats suddenly became very interested in vote-by-mail. The argument was that voting in person posed an additional risk of spreading disease, though the evidence was mixed.

What really excited the Democrats was the chance to use public resources to fund a get-out-the-vote operation that they knew, based on experience, favored them. After testing their model in a Wisconsin judicial race in April, they pushed for it to be adopted nationwide.

Republicans argued against vote-by-mail because they said it increased opportunities for fraud. Media fact-checkers claimed there was “no evidence” for that claim. But there certainly were accounts of past fraud in absentee voting.

Former President Jimmy Carter himself warned in 2005: “Absentee ballots remain the largest source of potential voter fraud.” Certainly the *potential* was there. Notably, the union representing postal workers endorsed the Democrat.

But the most important argument against vote-by-mail is that it ends the secret ballot.

In a recent union election in Illinois, workers voted by mail because of the pandemic. The deadline was postponed because roughly half the ballots were lost in the mail. Eventually, the union lost by one vote. The union tried to disqualify the ballots of two workers, whose names were revealed in the process.

The vote count was confirmed, but imagine the discomfort of the workers, who feared that they would be blamed by colleagues for the failure of their union.

Republicans are more fearful than Democrats of having their political views known. A recent Cato Institute poll showed that 62% of Americans are afraid of sharing their views. That included 52% of Democrats — and 77% of Republicans.

Events in recent months only reinforced that fear. The “cancel culture” targeted conservatives in the workplace; left-wing mobs invaded restaurants to demand families raise their fists in solidarity; social media censorship targeted conservatives.

A group of Harvard researchers called concerns about vote-by-mail a “disinformation campaign.” The words “secret ballot” do not appear once in their paper.

In early voting in 2020, nearly two-thirds of all ballots cast were cast by mail — and they favored Democrats. Historians will marvel that Americans adopted a new voting method in the midst of an election that so clearly favored one party.

But whatever its impact, vote-by-mail has killed the secret ballot. Partisan hacks run the vote again.