

ESSAY

The Federal Elections Bill of 1890: The Continuation of Reconstruction in America

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Abstract

Between May 1890 and January 1891, members of Congress debated a bill whose sponsors claimed it would shore up voting rights throughout the nation, especially in the South. The Federal Elections Bill of 1890 never became law, but the debate over it drew Americans' beliefs about voting, race, and the South back to the forefront of U.S. politics. Historians have relied mostly on two types of sources in their explorations of how Americans viewed the bill: newspapers and the words of political leaders. But 202 letters that individuals around the nation sent to Senator George Frisbie Hoar (R-MA) during the bill's nine-month life in Congress open a new window into the debate. These letters challenge the traditional history of the Federal Elections Bill and the late nineteenth century by revealing that issues historians traditionally have limited to the Reconstruction Era, in fact, still mattered profoundly to Americans in 1890.

Keywords: Federal Elections Bill; Lodge Bill; Force Bill; Reconstruction; Gilded Age; periodization; voting rights; elections; Fifty-first Congress; 1890

After the elections of 1888, Republicans gained control of the White House and both chambers of Congress simultaneously for the first time since 1875. They proceeded with a legislative agenda that included new bills on issues such as the tariff and silver coinage. Also on their agenda, however, was new legislation to shore up voting rights. Since 1875, state and local governments in the South had been working to keep Republican voters—and thus most of the region's black voters—away from the polls. At the same time, Democrats at the federal level had thwarted Republican efforts to use the federal government to intervene. But Republicans now had the majorities necessary to confront this ongoing disenfranchisement. So, in June 1890, Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA) introduced a bill to further empower federal supervisors of elections in districts where voters reported the infringement of their rights. The Federal Elections Bill of 1890 built on existing legislation and specifically targeted elections for the U.S. House of Representatives.

The introduction of the bill and the reaction of those opposed to it sparked one of the most hostile political moments in late nineteenth-century America. Opponents branded it a “force bill,” harkening back to their descriptions of legislation in the early 1870s. While state political leaders in the South called for a boycott of northern

manufacturing, Senator James Pugh (D-AL) warned that the bill would “insure the shedding of blood.”¹ After Republican leadership drove the bill through the House in July, Democratic senators greeted it in August with the first modern filibuster in U.S. history. Writing almost a hundred years later, one historian still described the campaign against the bill as one “of distortion and vilification perhaps unparalleled in the annals of American legislation.”² As Democrats blocked business in the Senate, Republicans cracked. Factions among the Republican senators allied with Democrats to put the bill aside on three different occasions. In the meantime, Democrats won a major victory in the 1890 midterm elections to reclaim the House and suspend consideration of new legislation to protect voting in the South indefinitely. Northern congressmen had learned their lesson—they did not make the protection of voting rights a major issue on the national level again until 1957.

According to the traditional periodization of late nineteenth-century U.S. history, the fight over the Federal Elections Bill occurred toward the end of the Gilded Age. That periodization divided the late nineteenth century into three separate periods: Reconstruction (1865 to 1877), the Gilded Age (1877 to the 1890s), and the Progressive Era (the 1890s into the twentieth century). In addition to establishing temporal boundaries between these periods, traditional periodization also attributed distinct thematic focuses to each period. Traditionalist historians portrayed the Reconstruction Era as one defined by issues of race, citizenship, and the South. The first to do so was Hilary Abner Herbert, who established this framework for the postwar period in a work of political propaganda he masqueraded as a work of history.³ Popular and academic historians subsequently embraced Herbert’s general interpretation and expanded it in their own work.⁴ At the same time, other historians established the traditional interpretation of the Gilded Age as a negative era of Big Business and government corruption, and the Progressive Era as a positive era of political activism and government reform.⁵ Again, the first to do so were contemporaries—James Bryce and Henry Adams.⁶ Several historians adopted this interpretation of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in the 1920s and 1930s, rounding out the traditional three-part periodization of the late nineteenth century.⁷

The history of the 1890 Federal Elections Bill reveals the imperfection of this traditional periodization. With its ties to issues such as the South, race, and citizenship, the history of the bill fits thematically into the traditional Reconstruction Era. Yet it occurred thirteen years after 1877, the year traditional periodization pegged as the end of Reconstruction. Indeed, according to that traditional periodization, the fight over the Federal Elections Bill took place nearly at the end of the Gilded Age.

Historiography further displays the connection between Reconstruction and the 1890 Federal Elections Bill, as scholarship about the latter has followed the same general arc as that about the former. In the early 1900s, several historians established the story of the Federal Elections Bill as one in which Democrats defeated an effort by partisan and power-obsessed Republicans to resurrect sectionalism during an era of reconciliation. Many of the chief proponents of this traditionalist understanding were the same men who had established a similar narrative for the pre-1877 period. James Ford Rhodes, for instance, described the term “Force bill” as “no misnomer.”⁸ Arthur W. Dunn, writing in 1922, portrayed the Democrats who led the filibuster in the Senate as heroes.⁹ William A. Dunning and William A. Robinson portrayed Republican lawmakers as driven by nothing except partisanship.¹⁰ By the middle of the twentieth century, however, some historians were pushing back against the traditionalist understanding.¹¹ In the 1960s, others made revision of the earlier interpretation more permanent.

Specifically, these revisionist historians argued that some Republican lawmakers behind the Federal Elections Bill had acted out of genuine desire for racial justice and concern about voting practices.¹² Since this revisionist period, historians have continued to investigate the history of the bill in studies of the South, the Republican Party, and general histories of the late nineteenth century. They have discovered a more complex narrative than those put forth by the traditionalists or the revisionists. Most post-revisionists, for instance, have shared Alexander Keyssar's conclusion that "Republicans supported the Federal Elections Bill for a mixture of partisan and principled reasons."¹³

Most traditionalists and their successors, though, have also touched on the connection between the 1890 bill and the fight for Reconstruction more directly. Most have viewed the 1890 defeat as causing the Republican Party's final abandonment of racial justice and specifically voting rights.¹⁴ Most have likewise agreed about the defeat's effect in southern history, chiefly in enabling white southern leaders to legalize and constitutionalize white supremacy more fully.¹⁵ Richard Welch described 1890 as "the last explosion of sectional anger and bitterness in the post-Civil War generation."¹⁶ Charles Calhoun believed that "the defeat of the Federal Elections bill, perhaps even more than the Compromise of 1877, spelled the doom of the new Republic."¹⁷ Others have made the connection more explicitly. Daniel Crofts, for instance, referred to the fight over the 1890 bill as the "twilight of Reconstruction."¹⁸ Dunn called it the "last Civil War and Reconstruction measure."¹⁹ Rebecca Edwards described it as Republicans' "last effort to preserve a piece of Reconstruction."²⁰ Dunning argued for a dual-periodization of Reconstruction, the first part ending in 1877 and the second extending to 1890.²¹

A previously underutilized source base draws out even further the extent to which the 1890 Federal Elections Bill marked a continuation of the fight over Reconstruction. Between May 1890 and January 1891, the nine-month life of the bill in Congress, Americans throughout the country sent thousands of letters, notes, and other correspondence to Senator George Frisbie Hoar (R-MA), who was the front man for the bill in the Senate. The writers of this correspondence came from diverse geographical and racial backgrounds, and their writings to Hoar covered a wide range of topics. The Massachusetts Historical Society has preserved 2,695 of these items. Of these 2,695 documents, 202—or about 8 percent—concerned the Federal Elections Bill. In 97 of those documents, writers included minor mentions of the bill, most frequently a request for a copy of the legislation. But in 105 of the 202 documents—in 52 percent of them—the writers responded to the bill with substantive analysis or opinion. In these 105 letters, Americans of 1890 voiced their fears, concerns, and hopes about the bill and its potential passage. Writers from the North and South dominated, constituting 43 percent and 44 percent of all writers, respectively.²² Certain historians have used these letters to Hoar—or similar letters to other congressional leaders—in their accounts of the Federal Elections Bill, but they have done so only briefly.²³

These letters, though, provide historians with a unique window into the fight over the elections bill. In the past, historians of the bill have relied mostly on two types of sources: on the one hand, government documents and the words of political leaders; and, on the other, newspapers. Both types of sources have presented historians with certain problems, largely due to concerns about partisanship. Historians have been reluctant to take political leaders at their word, and their skepticism has not been unjustified. The Fifty-First Congress was notoriously partisan, known for acts such as creating six new states out of western territories in a two-year period in the hope of ensuring a

Republican majority in the Senate.²⁴ In order to counteract these problems in the sources, historians have turned mostly to newspapers. Specifically, they have relied on newspapers to assess public opinion. But newspapers have presented their own problems, especially due to their own partisan interests. This was especially true in their coverage of the Federal Elections Bill. Before the bill passed the House in July, not only Democratic newspapers but also leading national independent newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* had started aggressive campaigns against it.²⁵ Unlike the persons behind these other sources, the writers of the letters to Hoar did not have the same political impetus to hide their true motivation for supporting or opposing the bill. Accordingly, when partisan interests drove their opinions, they said so. In the same way, these writers offered transparent explanations of other motivations, too. And they pointed to a wide variety of other justifications for their opinions, such as race, history, citizenship, national identity, and theology.

In doing so, these letters provide further evidence that the themes traditional periodization attributed to the pre-1877 period—race, citizenship, and the South—remained important political issues in 1890. This was true not just among political leaders and in newspapers; individuals whose voices have received less attention from historians shared those interests. In the minds of those who wrote to Hoar, the issues of the pre-1877 period continued to capture their attention enough to move them to send these letters. The depth and breadth of their analysis further demonstrated this point. Aligning with calls among historians to reorganize the late nineteenth century formally, these letters demonstrate even more fully the imperfection of the traditional periodization.

All those who wrote to Hoar agreed that, in 1890, southern state and local governments were inhibiting southern Republicans' right to vote. Most of those who mentioned it were southerners reporting on the situation in their areas. "As matters now stand," Mississippian D. C. Wasson wrote, "a Republican has no chance to exercise any voting rights here without either endangering his life or being ostracized."²⁶ Southerners described elections in their states as "a parody upon justice" and "a farce."²⁷ Lack of first-hand observation did not stop northerners from adding their assessment of southern elections. Royal Robbins Jr., co-owner of a watch company in Waltham, Massachusetts, believed that the "injustice of Southern elections has gone far enough."²⁸ All of these writers tended to agree on the cause of these fraudulent elections: white southern Democrats who, as Walker Brock wrote from Georgia, "have carried everything on their side by fraud, killing, and intimidation."²⁹ Many writers reported that disenfranchisement existed along party lines, not racial lines. "I am a white man," wrote former circuit court judge Charles Stearns from Georgia, "but it was no safer for me to vote than it was for my col[ore]d. brothers."³⁰

While none of the individuals who wrote Hoar disputed the corruption that existed in elections, though, many did oppose passage of the Federal Elections Bill. One of their main arguments was that any issues in the South would be better resolved without federal interference. C. Downing of Georgia reported "no race problem to solve" since the problems of the immediate postwar period were "being healed by the hand of Time."³¹ Some writers believed improving conditions for black Americans in the South made the bill unnecessary. "The colored people here are prosperous & contented," wrote J. W. Applegate, a former U.S. soldier who had moved to Florida in 1864.³² John A. Romell, another U.S. veteran who had lived in Alabama for over thirty years, held that a black American in the South stood "far better ... than he does in the North."³³ Turning to an argument southern Democrats often used to discourage federal

intervention in the South, some writers thought that the federal government ought to allow state and local governments in the South to act without federal intervention. One example was George Robbins, who identified himself as a white Republican who had migrated to Florida in 1886 after graduating from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts. He mourned that the “evil” of voter suppression was “about to be remedied by the southern people themselves ... until the force bill inflamed [sic] the people.”³⁴ An anonymous writer from Texas agreed: “If the North could let the South alone and leave her to attend her own affairs, she would find a fair and satisfactory solution of the negro question.”³⁵ An individual from Kentucky who identified herself only as “Mrs. James Bennett” supported these points by arguing that elections resided in the jurisdiction of state governments, not the federal government.³⁶

Andrew A. Chambers, who identified himself as a black American, discouraged passage of the bill because he believed black Americans needed to earn rights of citizenship on their own rather than through federal legislation. Chambers regretted that black Americans were “deceived by this unwise uproar about their votes,” which he believed was another instance of his race looking to “forces exterior to its self” as its “only hope.” Harping on masculinity, he mourned how among black American men “their manhood prowess is not so much as mentioned.” “A monkey may be taught to vote,” he wrote, incorporating some of the racially charged language of the time. He continued: “A monkey is not a man because he votes.”³⁷

Racial beliefs served a crucial role in a number of other letters, too. Some writers supported the abolition of slavery but criticized Republicans’ attempts to extend to black Americans the right to vote. John M. Groh of Breathedsville, Maryland described the abolition of slavery as “one of the grandest acts in our history, and one for which future generations will bless us.” The “extension of the suffrage to this ignorant and half barbarous race I fear was quite a different thing,” he continued, “and will be so looked upon by all futurity.”³⁸ B. H. Harley agreed in a letter from Washington, DC: the “greatest blunder the Republican Party has committed was to confer universal indiscriminate suffrage on the mass of ignorant Negroes, who are not to be relied upon and never satisfied.”³⁹ Others pointed to the history of the postwar period as evidence that black Americans would elect black officials if able to vote. “The Southern people look upon the Federal Elections Bill as an effort on the part of the North to force negro rule upon them,” reported an anonymous writer from Texas, “and they know from past experience what that means, an era of bad government.” Drawing on one of the era’s racist terms for black Americans, he added: “The Caucasian civilization of the South does not intend, however, to yield to Sambo.”⁴⁰ “These helpless people cannot rule America,” warned D. L. Russell from North Carolina.⁴¹ L. Harley from South Carolina portrayed himself as an ally to black Americans, writing: “I certainly sympathize with the newly enfranchised as much as any could.” But he believed “they are too ignorant to run any Gov successfully.”⁴²

Many writers feared that violence inevitably would follow passage of the bill. Some foresaw this violence occurring specifically along racial lines. J. W. Applegate of Florida, for instance, predicted the bill “will result in antagonizing the two races.”⁴³ Frequent in the letters were remarks such as those by John A. Romell of Alabama, who believed the “bill arrays the black man against the white man.” The “poor negro,” he continued, “is the sufferer.”⁴⁴ B. O. Duncan of South Carolina advised Hoar that a “true friend of the colored race then would not willfully do anything to provoke such conflict unnecessarily.” Duncan also captured the connectedness of partisanship and race in the letters,

writing, “whenever there is a conflict between the parties—that is essentially between the races.”⁴⁵ A. W. Shaffer of North Carolina saw violence as inevitable because of partisanship. Specifically, he warned: “a holocaust of blood is nothing to them as long as they can maintain democratic supremacy.”⁴⁶ Another North Carolinian, D. L. Russell, believed that the bill’s “defeat ... will save the lives of many of us.”⁴⁷

Partly because of their expectation of violence, those who wrote to Hoar also deemed the bill unenforceable and doomed to be ineffective. Some predicted that the threat of violence would keep black Americans from appealing for federal protection. George M. Robbins warned that anyone who did appeal “would probable [sic] be killed for his pains, and at least would be burned out and have to leave his home.”⁴⁸ George William Latimore agreed from New York: “In the South, if 50 or 100 men were to make a request of this kind and they lived through that election, it would be miraculous.” “Certainly they would not live to make the second request,” he added.⁴⁹ Others believed that black Americans would not make appeals because they were unable to act on their own. J. W. Applegate thought black Americans in the South would never challenge white Democrats because they “look to the white people for & obtain employment.”⁵⁰ John A. Romell agreed, reporting that every black southerner was “looking around for those whom he knew in the days of slavery, ole marster or mistis.”⁵¹ A. W. Shaffer, who identified himself as the “Late Chief Supervisor” of elections in North Carolina, took a different angle, criticizing the “judicial blindness” its authors had displayed in leaving too much power in the hands of state officials.⁵²

Concern about the future of the Republican Party served as another impetus for opposition to the bill. B. H. Harley, for instance, warned it would “accomplish no service but result in disaster to our party.”⁵³ Many writers predicted that the bill would strengthen the Democrats, agreeing with B. O. Duncan’s description of the bill as one “that would serve the Democrats at the South.”⁵⁴ Pervasive in the letters was the idea that Republicans were playing into the hands of Democrats by dividing the South along racial lines—they feared that all white southerners now would abandon the Republican Party. B. H. Harley warned that the bill made it “appear to the world as if the Republican Party was backing the Negro race as against the white race.”⁵⁵ Romell agreed: “you make every white man in the South stand as a unit ... making it impossible to divide the South politically.”⁵⁶

The authors of many of the letters concluded that the Republican leaders behind the bill were driven by nothing but misguided partisan interests. Republican leaders might be claiming racial justice or electoral justice as their motivation, but many of these writers did not believe them. Andrew A. Chambers denounced the bill as “intended more for the party than for the black man.”⁵⁷ B. F. Handforth from Chicago agreed, reporting that “people look upon the bill as a strictly party measure rather than ... in accordance with the highest principles of statesmanship.”⁵⁸ A Texan believed that “Republicans who favor the measure are, for the most part, actual or would be office seekers.”⁵⁹ Specifically, many saw the bill as Republican leaders’ attempt to resurrect the sectional issues of the postwar period. C. Downing of Georgia considered it “unwise and calculated to irritate and reopen old wounds.”⁶⁰ Romell described it as “purely a sectional bill.”⁶¹ Reporting his understanding of public opinion from St. Louis, Henry S. Chase wrote: “The mass of people are so dazed with the enormity of the proposed outrage on freedom and sanctity of the ballot, that they have not yet formulated the words of detestation which should characterize this conspiracy.”⁶²

Many of the nation’s newspapers at the time captured these arguments against the bill, presenting them as essential opinions among the American public. This was

especially true of two of the nation's most popular newspapers: the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Both identified as independent, but the *Post* leaned Democratic while the *Times* leaned Republican. In the early stages of the debate over the elections bill, though, both papers pushed against the bill not only in editorials but in their general coverage. Contrary to the consensus among the letters to Hoar, both papers downplayed election fraud in the South. The *Post* described "political outrages and assassinations in the South" as "magnified and exaggerated" while the *Times* mocked the "alleged irregularity of all elections in the South."⁶³ Like many of those who wrote Hoar in opposition to the bill, both papers portrayed any problems in the South as improving without federal intervention. The *Post*, for instance, claimed that "colored people as a class were never so well off."⁶⁴ While neither paper warned directly that passage of the bill would lead to violence, both alluded to it. The *Times*, for instance, warned of "political turmoil" in which black Americans in the South "would be the chief sufferers."⁶⁵ Both also denounced the bill as ineffective without illegal military force. The *Post*, for instance, described the South as not "alone in its aversion to the use of military force for the purpose of executing an odious statute."⁶⁶ Picking up some of the Social Darwinist theory that was prominent at the time, the papers also argued that the country would serve black Americans better by not stepping in. The *Post* argued that the "negro is every day becoming more and more able to take care of his rights, as do other citizens, by the strength of his own intelligence and will ... and a statute law will not hasten the day, but might delay it."⁶⁷ The argument against the bill most pervasive in both papers was that Republican lawmakers acted only out of partisan motivation. The *Times* portrayed Republican lawmakers as supporting the bill because of interest specifically in patronage, describing it as a "spoils measure."⁶⁸ Furthermore, the paper wrote about Republican lawmakers: "They don't think that it will protect the negro vote. They don't care whether it does or not."⁶⁹ The "real purpose" of the bill, the *Times* claimed, was "to create a disturbance, to reawaken the passions of the war."⁷⁰ Moreover, both papers presented the bill as lacking any support from the American public. The *Times* ran a headline about the bill that read, "No Public Sentiment Behind It," while the *Post* ran one that read, "The People Don't Want It."⁷¹ The *Post* reported that "there has been no call for such legislation."⁷² According to the coverage of these self-identified independent newspapers, the arguments among the letters to Hoar against the bill appeared to tell the whole story.

But, contrary to the impression offered by newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, the letters to Hoar demonstrate that public sentiment behind the bill did exist. As G. H. Crane proclaimed from DC, "it is the duty of all citizens, however humble, to speak out at this time with words of encouragement to the true men in Congress who are contending for honest elections."⁷³ Many did exactly that. While sometimes expressing concerns about the bill in the same letters, these individuals presented extensive and thorough explanations backing their sentiments. As in arguments against the legislation, those in favor of it described their true motivations with transparency.

Some of the letters expressed support out of partisan interests, confirming the allegations made in newspapers and in some of the letters discouraging the bill. D. C. Wasson of Greenville, Mississippi, supported the bill as a measure to counter partisan efforts on the Democratic side. He saw "no use in trying to please the Democrats, for the more respect paid them, the more corrupt & defiant they become."⁷⁴ Others advocated the legislation because they thought it would cause the electoral triumph of the Republican Party in the South. "Nearly every Southern State would give a Republican

majority if a fair election was held,” predicted Charles Stearns from Georgia.⁷⁵ C. W. R. Bush, a Floridian, went as far as to describe the bill as “a death knell to the Democrats.”⁷⁶

But writers also supported passage of the elections bill on a number of grounds other than partisan interest. Electoral justice was a frequent justification for support of the measure: many writers believed election and voter fraud in the South disgraced the nation’s core values. Referring to the South, John A. Edmondson of Illinois could think of “no territory in the bounds of which Human Freedom is so completely ignored and Human Rights less secure.”⁷⁷ A group of “colored citizens of the Tenth Congressional District, State of Tennessee” agreed: “nowhere among civilized and Christian nations does the world look upon such an exhibition of frauds and such mockery of human rights.”⁷⁸ Under the letterhead of the “Afro-American News Company” in New York, an anonymous writer believed that “patriotism, justice, the safety and happiness of our citizens and the peace of the country, makes [sic] the passage of the Lodge bill a necessity.”⁷⁹ A writer from Pennsylvania who identified himself as a U.S. Army veteran agreed, urging that “the bad elements of the South must be overwhelmed, beaten, and taught to obey the majesty of the law and the American constitution.”⁸⁰

Drawing parallels between the 1890 fight and the struggle against secession in 1860 became another central justification in the letters. “The knell that is now being sounded over the country is the same that was heard in ... the Halls of Congress in 1860,” wrote H. Price Williams from DC.⁸¹ “I am old enough to recollect the ‘Rebel yell’ before the rebellion,” added N. Seabury Simmons from Pennsylvania, “and the present ‘yell’ has the same sound.”⁸² Another Pennsylvanian named George S. Houghton agreed, reminding Hoar that “the patriots of 1860 drew on their devoted heads the vials of wrath of the enemies of civil liberty.” He was “not surprised at the action of these people and their children” in attacking the elections bill, which he described as “intended to more certainly insure the perpetuity of the Republic.”⁸³ D. L. Russell of North Carolina, who had also expressed opposition to the bill because of his racial beliefs, hoped it would “convince the North that the irrepressible conflict has not been repressed.” The country, he warned, “must be ruled either by the North under the Constitution or by the South in defiance of it.”⁸⁴ O. H. Platt of New York, who boasted about his “acquaintance with my namesake in the Senate,” described the 1890 battle as a “phase of the southern rebellion.” Southerners had the same goal of maintaining white supremacy, he argued, but this time by “destroying the ballot box.”⁸⁵

Accordingly, many writers believed that Republicans needed to respond in 1890 as they had in 1860: by standing up to the southern bullies and passing the elections bill. Criticizing Republicans, Charles Stearns denounced the “whole policy of the Govt. towards the South” as a “mistaken one, from beginning to end” because “the govt. has acted as if it feared the South.”⁸⁶ Specifically, many writers encouraged Republican lawmakers not to back off the bill in the face of threats of violence. “If the South wants ‘blood,’” declared Augustus Hammond from Arkansas, “let them begin & they will be glad to cry ‘enough.’”⁸⁷ William R. Moore of Memphis, agreed: “If all American citizens cannot have the just exercise of their constitutional right without it, then there ought to be bloodshed.”⁸⁸ Writing from Wilmington, North Carolina, the site of an infamous race-based massacre eight years later, D. L. Russell offered even stronger words: “Better that we be murdered in the attempt to execute this bill than the country shall permanently pass under the control of Southern bandits and Northern traitors.”⁸⁹

Calls for the government to be willing to enforce the bill with troops appeared in numerous letters. W. R. Buck stated this most directly: “put the army behind it if necessary.”⁹⁰ But others called for more drastic measures. Referring to the South, Wallach Folsom of Connecticut concluded: “We ought to keep a regular army there at all times.”⁹¹ “We have 10,000,000 loyal men who can, if necessary, guard every ballot box in our country with bayonets 16 ft. deep,” added Benjamin F. Bell.⁹² Daniel R. Rutherford, an Ohioan, offered an intricate legal justification for sending in the army that included citing George Washington’s actions during the Whiskey Rebellion as a precedent.⁹³

The Civil War, many writers believed, had been fought and won to ensure the rights of citizenship for black American men. H. Morgan reminded Hoar from St. Louis that “we waded through ... a bitter war of four years to save this Union & give this right [suffrage] to the poor colored men of the South.” This “privilege,” he believed, remained a “mockery.”⁹⁴ James Manton, a writer from Wisconsin, regretted the “shameful disgrace of our party’s neglect to redeem its pledges.”⁹⁵ Charles Stearns added: “our party has never fulfilled its promise to the colored man.”⁹⁶ A U.S. Army veteran and member of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) named G. B. Williams agreed, reporting that “soldiers greatly desire that the U.S. should see that every one ... be allowed to cast his vote” since they felt “that was the principal thing established by the war.”⁹⁷

Not only had this change in the national citizenry been the chief positive change after the war, many writers held, but black American men deserved their citizenship and the rights that went with it. “We are identified with a race which has participated in every war that has been fought for glory and perpetuation of this government,” wrote H. Price Williams. He added: “The Afro American knows but one constitution and one flag.”⁹⁸ J. E. Bruce, who like Williams identified himself as a black American, hoped the bill would ensure “actual possession of the great badge of citizenship—the ballot,” which he reminded Hoar black Americans had “earned by a loyal support of the government.”⁹⁹ O. H. Platt called the Federal Elections Bill a “duty we owe to the colored men.”¹⁰⁰ Clarke W. Harrington, a Virginian, continued to express hope: “I trust, sir, that after all these weary and disheartening years ... justice to the Black man is now almost at hand.”¹⁰¹ Black Americans, the South Carolina Republican Association reminded Hoar, were “not here by choice ... they were brought here.”¹⁰²

Some writers went as far as to argue that Republican lawmakers had a theistic responsibility to pass the elections bill. “God is with us,” wrote H. Price Williams, for instance.¹⁰³ In these letters, George Frisbie Hoar came across as a Christ figure in the struggle over the bill. Francis T. Morton, for instance, encouraged Hoar: “God entrusts his best work only to shoulders broad enough to carry it, and yours were measured long ago.” He described Hoar’s effort to ensure equal voting rights in the South as “divinely appointed work” and promised that “God will surely aid you.”¹⁰⁴ Charles Stearns agreed: “God has selected you as a standard bearer in the cause of oppressed humanity.”¹⁰⁵ J. E. Bruce expressed confidence and hope in the bill and the larger fight for justice. “The Negro has no fears as to the future,” Bruce declared, “for he has an abiding faith in the great god above us.”¹⁰⁶

Some individuals directly disputed claims that the bill had no public support, claiming that the bill had substantial support. Writing from Massachusetts, Royal Robbins Jr. informed Hoar: “The bill is popular here.”¹⁰⁷ H. Price Williams described how the bill “awakened a new enthusiasm in our bosoms, and rallied to our standard a hundred thousand young men.”¹⁰⁸ Individuals in the South notified Hoar about support for

the bill, too. "Southern Republicans are grateful," wrote Henry S. Chubb from Florida.¹⁰⁹ "Patriots throughout the nation will rejoice ... [at] the early passage by Congress of an election law," agreed W. R. Moore, a Tennessean.¹¹⁰ R. A. Mosley reported support from his state, too: "Alabama Republicans earnestly desire the passage of the Election Law."¹¹¹ Maybe most telling was a letter from L. Harley in South Carolina. He identified himself as "a very conservative citizen," citing his belief that "it would be dangerous to have the reins of our State go entirely in the hands of the ignorant/ newly-enfranchised." Nevertheless, Harley praised the bill: "it seems to me that every good conservative man could endorse it."¹¹²

The letters in favor of the Federal Elections Bill proved the point these writers were trying to make: the bill had more support throughout the nation than many newspapers and other sources have implied. The letters shed light on what Maxwell Woodhull in Massachusetts referred to as the "perverted or weak explanations of the papers."¹¹³ While these letters do not provide enough evidence to allow a thorough assessment of what percentage of the public supported or opposed the bill, they do reinforce several conclusions historians have reached concerning public support for the bill. Many historians have stated, for instance, that the lack of support from western Republicans was crucial to the failure of the bill.¹¹⁴ The letters to Hoar confirm this apathy—westerners constituted only 13 percent of Hoar's incoming correspondence about the Federal Election Bill, and many of them wrote in opposition. Several scholars have also argued that popular support for the bill dissipated as debate over it dragged on.¹¹⁵ The letters to Hoar support this argument, too—writers sent seventy-five letters to Hoar about the bill in August and never more than twenty-eight in any subsequent month.

But, more than any other point, the letters demonstrate the extent to which the fight over Reconstruction continued into 1890. The depth and breadth of the arguments laid out in these letters demonstrate the extent to which the bill mattered to these writers, and a statistical analysis of Hoar's incoming correspondence during this period further captures the importance of the Federal Elections Bill. At the same time as the debate over it, Congress had two other main issues on its docket. The first was the tariff, for which Republicans passed the McKinley Tariff Bill of October 1.¹¹⁶ The second was silver coinage, for which Republicans passed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of July 14.¹¹⁷ In May and June, Hoar received 104 letters about the tariff bill, compared to only 17 about the elections bill. Yet in July that trend began to change: Hoar received 39 letters about the elections bill compared to only 21 about the tariff bill. In August that change accelerated: Hoar received 75 letters about the elections bill and only 12 about the tariff. More telling, however, was who wrote the letters on each topic. During those four months, 79 of the 137 letters Hoar received about the tariff bill—58 percent of them—came from writers who either identified themselves as involved in business or wrote on paper with business letterheads. During this same period, 60 of the 131 letters Hoar received about the elections bill—46 percent of them—came from authors who did not identify any leadership roles in business, national politics, or newspapers. At the same time, only 11 of Hoar's writers about the elections bill identified a connection to business, and only 21 of the letters about the tariff included no identifiable evidence of a position of authority in government, journalism, or business. While Hoar's major role with the elections bill and more minor role with the tariff bill may lead to some bias in this data, the disparity between the incoming correspondence about the tariff and elections bills implies a clear predominance of the latter in the minds of those who wrote Hoar.¹¹⁸ Royal Robbins Jr. appeared to be touching on a

broader truth when he reported from Waltham, Massachusetts, that people cared about the elections bill “far more than the new tariff.”¹¹⁹

Occurring in 1890, thirteen years after the end of Reconstruction and toward the end of the Gilded Age according to the traditional periodization, the fight over the elections bill—now buttressed by these letters to show its importance in the American mind more fully—supports the calls of some historians to revise the periodization of the late nineteenth century. In the past fifteen years, several historians have made direct calls for formal re-periodization of the late nineteenth century. In 2002, Elisabeth Israels Perry proposed wedding the history of the late nineteenth century into an extended period from the 1870s to 1950 based on her study of women’s political activism. She labeled this period one of “progressive reform.”¹²⁰ In 2006, Richard Schneirov called for a re-periodization of the era based on applying new approaches in political economy to the Gilded Age. He argued that the Panic of 1873 should mark the start year of the Gilded Age, not the traditional starting point of 1877.¹²¹ Rebecca Edwards interpreted Schneirov’s work as implying a period she termed “The Age of Incorporation” from 1873 to 1896.¹²² Also in that year, in a synthesis titled *New Spirits*, Edwards put forth another idea for how to reorganize the period. She proposed a period termed the “Long Progressive Era” that started in 1865 and carried forward to either 1920 or 1934, with 1905 marking a turning point between the “Early Progressive Era” and a later stage of it.¹²³ Edwards expanded her case for this new periodization in an article three years later.¹²⁴ Richard John called for maintaining the traditional temporal boundaries for the late nineteenth century but redefining the Gilded Age by changing its name and emphasizing the innovations of the period.¹²⁵ Whereas Rebecca Edwards had called for a “Long Progressive Era,” in 2015 Leon Fink preferred a “Long Gilded Age” since “the phrase usefully refocuses attention on bursting social inequalities.”¹²⁶ In *The Republic for Which It Stands* (2016), Richard White added another proposal for how to re-periodize the late nineteenth century. While Edwards had called for carrying the traditional Gilded Age forward into the Progressive Era, White preferred carrying the Gilded Age back into Reconstruction.¹²⁷ Most recently, Heather Cox Richardson called for a periodization beginning in 1860 and ending in 1920 that emphasized “a contest over political participation and the nature of government.” This period, she argued, “amounted to the creation of a new nation” and thus “seems properly to be called Reconstruction.”¹²⁸

Regardless of how historians formally revise the periodization of the late nineteenth century, it is important that they do so. Despite some truth in David Mayhem’s criticism that periodization tends to “sustain frozen ways of thinking,” the proposal he and some others in the field of American Political Development (APD) have made to abandon it altogether would sacrifice its advantages.¹²⁹ Several of their peers in APD have written on these advantages, such as Andrew Polsky’s commending how periodization calls “attention to significant historical transitions.”¹³⁰ What, then, is the best way forward? The best strategy for re-periodization appears to be that proposed by Elisabeth Israels Perry, Rebecca Edwards, and Heather Cox Richardson. Although the three have proposed different specific dates and names for their periodization of the late nineteenth century, they have all applied a principle that applies more globally to U.S. history as well: broader periodization works best. All three, generally speaking, have proposed a period that begins around the Civil War and ends around the Great Depression. Such a broad periodization would resolve the imperfections exposed in the era by events like the Federal Elections Bill and letters such as those individuals sent to Senator Hoar. Broad periodization, in fact, might resolve similar issues in

other eras of U.S. history. Accordingly, a model might be Bruce Ackerman's three-volume constitutional history *We the People* (1991–2014), which separated all of U.S. history into three large periods: the first from the nation's founding to secession, the second from secession to the New Deal, and the third from the New Deal to the present.¹³¹

Andrew Polsky and Heather Cox Richardson have both identified how people at the time viewed their era as essential to periodization.¹³² Until now, historians have relied on the words of political leaders and newspapers in order to discover how people in the United States viewed the 1890 Federal Elections Bill. They have followed the recommendation the *Springfield Republican* put forth on July 7, 1890, to "Let the press speak for the people."¹³³ With the letters to George Frisbie Hoar, we can now let some of the people speak for themselves. What they say is that in 1890 the issues of race, citizenship, and the South that historians traditionally attributed to an earlier era remained at the forefront of the American political mind.

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