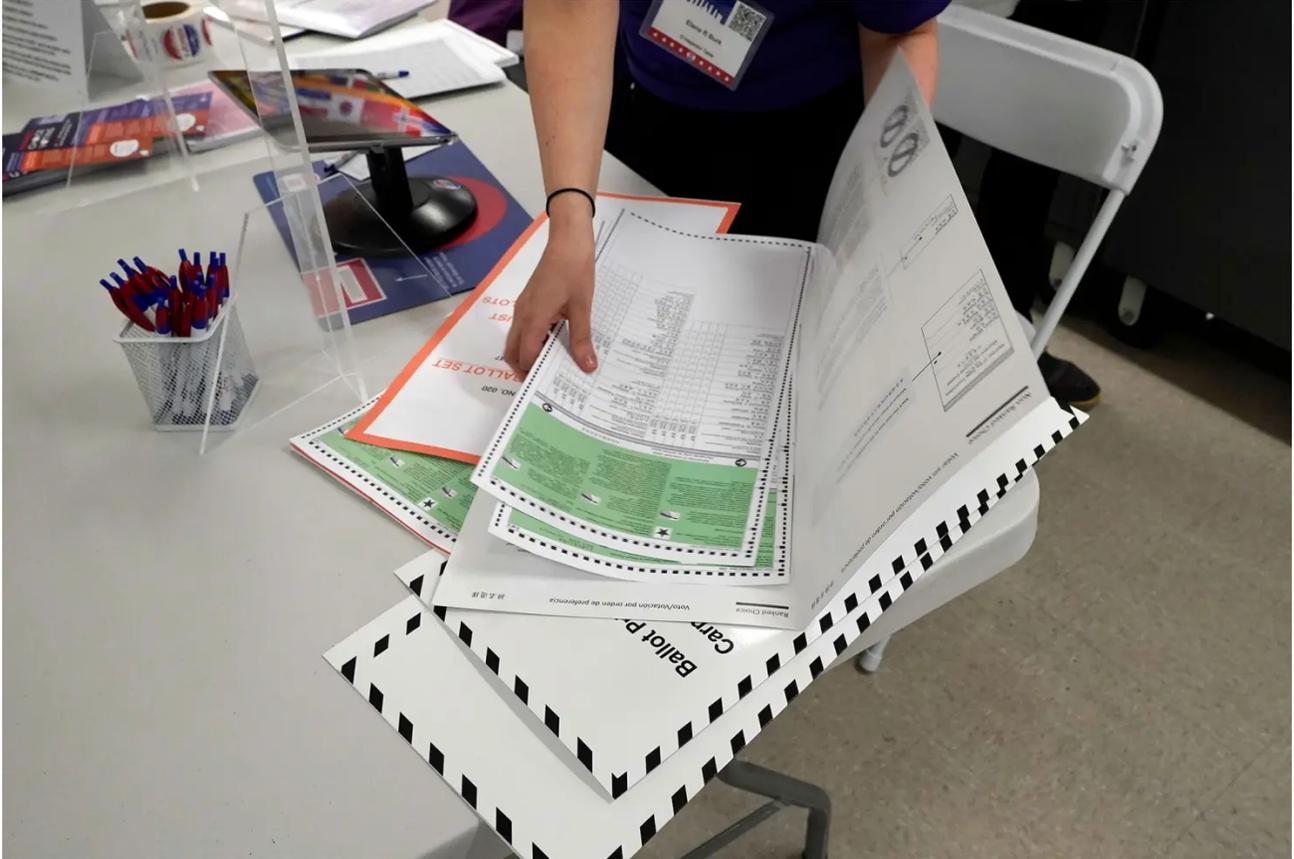


# Making voting compulsory is a bad idea — and wouldn't change our polarized politics

Walter Olson



The notion to make voting mandatory has been floated in the US government since 2012. AP Photo/Richard Drew

Prepare to hear more about a bad idea: making voting compulsory by law. Australia and some other countries do, and the idea has been floated closer to home by figures like President Barack Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Two years ago a Brookings Institution and Harvard Kennedy School's

Ash Center working group [called for such laws](#), and now Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. of Brookings and the Ash Center's Miles Rapoport have turned the idea [into a book](#).

The right answer remains "No way."

Voting, like standing for the national anthem or pledge, is a public civic ritual from which some would rather be excused. Mandatory-voting advocates sometimes talk as if conscience issues and the [specter of compelled speech](#) could be headed off by, say, giving citizens the option to cast a blank ballot. But for many among us, refusing to join in one or every election is itself a way to send a distinctive [expressive message](#).

How would a legal obligation to vote be enforced? Overseas examples suggest that the predominant mechanism would be smallish fines and fees, occasionally combined with further sanctions such as hassles for persons trying to obtain or renew one or another license or permission.

We understand better than we did a generation ago how the proliferation of petty government fines, fees and paperwork has made life harder for the poor and hard-pressed. People holding down multiple jobs or juggling difficult family responsibilities can find that a missed appointment here and a piece of mail gone astray there result in more hardship and disorder, especially if penalties compound — which may be seen as the only way to prevent wide noncompliance.

Let's be real: A lot of the interest in conscripting voters has historically

come from partisans who think their side would win more often if everyone were made to show up. It was long the standard wisdom that nonvoters leaned more to the left than regular voters. As recently as 2012, a [Pew poll found](#) nonvoters held much more favorable views of Obama than did frequent voters.

But it didn't last. A major 2020 Knight Foundation study of nonvoters [found they now](#) "split down the middle" between Democratic and Republican voting propensity.

Demographics provide some explanation. Most [surveys agree](#) nonvoters skew younger, less educated and lower earning and (in

America) by a substantial margin more Hispanic. There was a time these categories correlated closely with leftward voting preferences, but no longer: Republicans do better these days with the less educated and less affluent, for example, and are making rapid gains with Hispanics.

Even if nonvoters are hard to characterize on a conventional political spectrum, they do differ systematically in some ways from voters. Poll after poll confirms [they are less informed](#) and less familiar with the candidates; in fact, many nonvoters say that's the reason they chose not to vote. Australia has long grappled with the problem of the "[donkey vote](#)," cast by low-attachment voters who simply check off in order the first names they find on the ballot.

Nonvoters are also a more alienated bunch. They are more likely [to think](#) the “system is rigged,” [that](#) “success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control” and that “things will go on just as they did before” no matter which side wins office. They are, in short, both less well informed and less civically involved than voters. (Of those not registered to vote in Pew’s survey, incidentally, 11% said they didn’t want to register for privacy or security reasons.)

This element of civic estrangement is a reason to doubt the claim that nonvoters would be a moderating influence on American political polarization.

Centrist scholar Bill Galston [has argued](#) that roping in this group could “strengthen the forces of conciliation” because it is less “fervent” and more resistant to “red-meat rhetoric.” Don’t count on it.

It's true that nonvoters don't sort out as neatly as frequent voters along the ideological lines that divide the major parties. Alas, that doesn't mean they'll be more calm, judicious or resistant to demagogic appeals.

Indeed, one lesson of recent research into persons who fall into intermediate categories in political polls, often labeled "moderates," is that quite a few resist classification not because they have achieved an elegant equipoise between each camp's best arguments but because they harbor a mix of intemperate or wacky "left" and "right" opinions.

Competing for turnout — that is, competing to move targeted subsets of nonvoters into your column — is in fact a chief way in which

American parties and candidates compete. Flunking at turnout sends a painful message that your candidate or set of issues isn't inspiring enough. Seen that way, compulsory voting resembles a scheme to eliminate by force one of the surest means of genuine competition in contemporary politics.

Like many demands that travel under the name of reform, it proposes to win by coercion what America's political actors have failed to win by persuasion.

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